The Causes of Common-Edge Drift: A Norfolk Study

Abstract

The phenomenon of settlements moving away from their churches, towards the edges of surrounding commons is known as ‘common-edge drift’. Existing literature emphasises the ‘isolated church’, but this not the only indication of common-edge drift – an ‘embedded’ church will often have been constructed after drift, within the new settlement. Using an assortment of historic maps, documents, archaeological surveys and environmental datasets this paper discusses the causes of ‘common-edge drift’ in Norfolk, addressing an issue that has gone largely ignored for the past thirty years. By creating a set of categories and applying them to all churches marked on Faden’s 1797 map of Norfolk it is possible to apply new GIS techniques to the data. The findings show that six individual primary factors were in play across the county, with different combinations resulting in the ‘isolated’ or ‘embedded’ landscapes familiar to us today. I conclude the only factor affecting every category of settlement was access to common land, and regional differences in population and land-use dictated how a settlement would respond when faced with common-land shortages.

INTRODUCTION

A hundred years is youth in a church and age in a house.¹

The Norfolk landscape is known for one particular distinctive feature – the ‘isolated’ parish church standing surrounded by wheat or cows, some distance from the nearest settlement. While they today stand ‘isolated’, archaeological evidence shows that they were all originally built within a settlement – rarely was a church intended to be separate from the houses. At some point the settlement moved away from the church site and towards the edges of the common. This process, widely accepted but never thoroughly explained, has become known as ‘common-edge drift’, and its traces can been seen throughout the Norfolk landscape. The influence of this process varies greatly however, forming both the ubiquitous ‘isolated’ church, but also the ‘embedded’.

The evidence suggests that even many of the most isolated churches were kept in use, remaining an integral but distant part of the parish. Movement away from the building was generally slow, as the inhabitants were pushed or lured to land on the
edges of their settlement. Archaeological surveys suggest this was first seen in the Late Saxon period, continuing through the Medieval. The significant point is that the now-‘isolated’ church was almost invariably built before the common edge was settled, no matter when during this ‘Drift Period’ that occurred.

Although this study has focussed on ‘common-edge drift’ in Norfolk, the findings have application across the country, with universal themes of population growth, land pressure, status, and agricultural techniques driving the change and determining its form. Common-edge drift has never before been systematically analysed, and this study uses advances in Geographic Information Systems technology to establish settlement categories. That evidence is used to build a more complete picture of the process by which settlements became separated from their church.

**Sources**

**Faden**

The base map for this survey is Andrew Macnair’s geo-rectified version of William Faden’s 1797 Norfolk map (Figure 1).ii This map represents the most complete and accurate image of Norfolk before the nineteenth century enclosure of land significantly altered the landscape. The first wave of parliamentary enclosure in the 1770s and 80s had very little impact on Norfolk, and commons still followed medieval patterns when Faden’s surveyors mapped the country.iii
To mitigate for surveying flaws, distances have been interpreted with some flexibility and used as an indicator of settlement category, rather than as accurate depictions of the layout. General settlement patterns have remained stable since the Middle Ages, but nevertheless new churches and villages were created in the interim between the Drift Period and Faden. Some churches have also been mislocated or are entirely absent from the map, but the buildings included are generally an accurate depiction of patterns. This is particularly true for smaller village and hamlets, and around the edge of commons. Faden’s representation of commons and wastes is also considered to be reliable and will be employed by this study. Technically some of these areas might be better described as demesne land, but this study takes a broad interpretation of common. It effectively covers all uninhabited spaces, because the focus is on patterns across Norfolk. While some areas undoubtedly had private use, this fact will not greatly affect the overall findings. This research is the first to systematically approach the question of common-edge drift and it opens up the field for further analysis.
Other documents and map sources have been used for sample villages to create as complete an image as possible – enclosure, tithe or estate maps have been preferred. The first edition Ordnance Survey provides geo-referencing points, more accurate spatial data and verification of church positions. Field walking reports also map out the former layout of a village, including the position of the church and discovered sites of habitation. It should be noted that archaeological evidence is difficult to discover, especially in embedded settlements, due to the invasive nature of investigation. Finally *Domesday Book* and architectural dating evidence was used to establish the presence of those churches coming under close scrutiny during this study.

**Soil Maps**

The soil map used for this study has been surveyed by the Soil Survey of England and Wales. Although designed for use by modern farmers and agronomists, the information contained can shed some light on the agrarian circumstances of earlier centuries. It divides the information into *series* and associations – the series describes the broad make-up of the soil, ‘sandy over fine loamy’ or ‘clayey over peaty’ for example, while each association describes a set of series that will often be found together to make up all the levels of a piece of land, down to the bedrock.

This map does not detail every valley and field, but it provides classification data for each area, enabling an analysis of the overall patterns, while allowing for spatial variation and centuries of soil changes. Figure 2 shows where, for example, the large areas of Beccles 1 soil lie, and Figure 3 shows the relationship of the churches with each soil type.
Figure 2.

*Soil map with categorised churches from Faden*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>A1 - North West</th>
<th>B1 - Central North</th>
<th>C1 - North East</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral</td>
<td>26 38%</td>
<td>59 35%</td>
<td>20 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded</td>
<td>15 22%</td>
<td>33 20%</td>
<td>21 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>13 19%</td>
<td>27 16%</td>
<td>16 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated</td>
<td>8 12%</td>
<td>32 19%</td>
<td>41 37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common-edge settlement</td>
<td>5 7%</td>
<td>5 3%</td>
<td>6 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No settlement</td>
<td>2 3%</td>
<td>6 4%</td>
<td>6 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scattered</td>
<td>7 4%</td>
<td>2 2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
<td><strong>69 100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>169 100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>112 100%</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<th>B2 - Central South</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral</td>
<td>21 36%</td>
<td>37 25%</td>
<td>28 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded</td>
<td>8 14%</td>
<td>20 14%</td>
<td>16 11%</td>
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<td>14 24%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated</td>
<td>6 10%</td>
<td>44 30%</td>
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<td>Scattered</td>
<td>1 2%</td>
<td>10 7%</td>
<td>15 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
<td><strong>59 100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>148 100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>152 100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.
CATEGORISATION

All classification processes are problematic, and attempts to categorise the relationship between a church and settlement are no different. Each settlement is unique in its layout, and to apply one of only several labels to it is to generalise and remove the particular subtleties that give it an identity. Faden’s 1797 map fossilises the Norfolk landscape at a time significantly later than the Drift Period, and must therefore contain misleading information – common-edge settlements that have lost all trace of their common or the inclusion of modern churches, to name but two. Most of the key problems can be mitigated through the use of other sources – other maps, or archaeological reports for example. Any attempt to categorise the churches across Norfolk is, however, better than nothing – the big picture is crucial to understanding the patterns of church and settlement relationships, although it may contain local shortcomings.

Using ArcMap I examined each individual church and its relationship to the settlement, looking at the appearance and the rough measurements between church and nearest houses. Distances were rounded to the nearest 10m to allow for inherent weaknesses in Faden’s map, and every classification asked ‘how does this church fit into the settlement?’ Some churches straddled several categories, but only two or three required ‘creative interpretation’ – not enough to affect the overall patterns. The final seven categories selected for this study were as follows (Figure 4).
Embedded: The church is surrounded by buildings, although it does not have to be in the exact centre or densely surrounded. The most important factor is that the church is not distant from the buildings – they start within approximately 100 metres of the church.

Peripheral: The settlement extends away from the church, starting within approximately 100 metres. Three of the four sides are clear of marked structures, so that fewer than 10% of the buildings lie behind the church (on the non-settlement side). Whether the church is on the side or end of the settlement, there is the appearance of a settlement spreading away from it. In many locations enclosure, emparkment and other land changes have removed clear signs of what the settlement was stretching towards, but there is evidence to suggest the target was a common.

Common-edge peripheral: The church abuts onto or is immediately adjacent to a common or heath and the settlement spreads out from it around the edge of the
common. The buildings may start a little further from the church than for ‘peripheral’, allowing for changes in the common shape or removal of buildings.

**Marginal:** The church lies approximately 100-500 metres away from the main cluster of buildings. This category allows for settlement shrinkage, buildings that are missing on Faden, or large and longstanding glebe lands around the church.

**Isolated:** The nearest cluster of buildings is more than 500 metres away. A small number of isolated buildings may be closer, but do not indicate a settlement hub. 500 metres was chosen as the minimum distance as it represents approximately six minutes walking in a straight line, but closer to ten on a bending and poorly maintained medieval road. Such a distance is significant for a building that initially formed the central point of both spiritual and secular life in the settlement.

**Scattered:** There may be multiple small clusters of buildings, or an even scatter ranging 50-1500 metres from the church, with no obvious hub of settlement. Often the church will lie in the approximate centre of this scatter.

**No Settlement:** the map does not show any buildings that clearly belong with that church. This may be a deserted or over-scattered settlement, or a peculiarity of Faden’s surveying.

Although all the categories are important, some contribute more to understanding the causes of common-edge drift than others. The primary categories considered in this study are ‘embedded’, ‘peripheral’ and ‘isolated’. ‘Common-edge peripheral’ and ‘marginal’ contribute further to this study, but also form an interesting subset. Further analysis is difficult without extending the scope of this study to pre- and post-drift churches. Few ‘scattered’ and ‘no settlement’ churches were identified, and those identified have therefore been omitted from subsequent analysis.

**Source Analysis**

Figure 5 shows Williamson and Skipper’s map of Late Saxon population densities, calculated from *Domesday Book*, overlain with the churches from Faden and a 1500 metre buffer.\(^{vi}\) The 1500 metre buffer is not intended to be an accurate representation of the area covered by every settlement, but instead shows the possible concentration of settlement and cultivation at about the time the church was established. Although the population map contains many unavoidable flaws, outlined by the creators, it shows that the eleventh century populations and the distribution of churches in 1797
followed a very similar patterns. Few areas of significant population density in 1086 are without a church in Faden’s time. This map also demonstrates the medieval population differences across the county: concentrated in the east, low in the west, and large centres in the south.

![Figure 5. Late Saxon population densities with churches and their radii](image)

Figure 5 shows all the churches marked out on Faden’s map, again with a 1500 metre buffer. This map clarifies the relationship between churches, settlements and the wider landscape. Several patterns become apparent – the north-east is crowded with churches, with very few open spaces, while the west shows the complete reverse. The map there is dominated by large open spaces, with the churches scattered across. They are not, however, scattered randomly. There are lines of churches forming edges of large areas devoid of any churches, or perhaps just one in the very centre. An explanation for this phenomenon can be found by focussing on the north-east.
The majority of the few larger open areas in the north-east are shown as common on Faden’s map, such as Mousehold Heath or Hevingham Common (a pattern also seen in the south-west at Kilverstone and Brettenham). This pattern is repeated in the smaller ‘open’ areas, where Faden’s map still shows numerous vacant spaces with a small common at the centre, such as Roughton. Common land was a necessary unbuilt resource; those spaces without church must have been common or wasteland accessible by all the parishes, land that has shrunk inwards after the settlements ceased drifting and their sites became stable.

What therefore shows is that churches (and settlements) were based around commons, and therefore those spaces without churches are probably areas of former wasteland that have since been enclosed. In the north-east this is seen in a network of small spaces dotted throughout, while the west operates on a larger scale. The vast expanses here were large tracts of waste, edged by churches and settlements. Faden’s map has fossilised an entire network of former...
common and wasteland that was fragmented by the expansion of cultivated land during medieval population and settlement growth.

Some of these lost tracts of common do have a church within their boundaries, but the majority are either not listed in Domemday Book, for example Amner in the northwest; or belong to a settlement that is large by 1086, such as Wymondham in the south. It can be said that these settlements are probably either established after the Drift Period, as a new settlement, or are an old settlement, established after some incursion on to the wasteland. Swaffham and Wymondham demonstrate how this latter category may have taken shape. Both are contained within a ragged circumference of common, suggesting they were like an island within a sea of common. The settlement expanded outwards but did not connect with any other neighbours. The size of these settlements, however, obfuscates evidence of development and this study has therefore intentionally focused on smaller settlements.

The final sign of this ancient network of commons is found in the interlaced strips along roads and small scraps of common at the centre of enormous farmland areas, such as Rudham Common south-east of Houghton. These are the final remnants of a common system stretching across the county; even in the crowded north-east small traces remain, albeit at a far smaller scale.

In the south and east more commons have survived to the eighteenth century, and there are clear lines of churches along the edges of commons. By applying this pattern to the open spaces in the west, ancient commons long since enclosed are revealed. Spiderwebs of commons follow the roads, with small patches of central common nibbled evenly from all sides that attest to the former existence of far larger systems. What then becomes apparent is that western Norfolk was once characterised by large areas of waste, with settlements (and churches) forming a border around them, while the more-populous east was tightly packed, with smaller commons serving smaller areas. This demonstrates that commons were a universal feature, but their size and survival varied according to regional differences.

**CATEGORY ANALYSIS**

‘Embedded’
The distribution of ‘embedded’ churches remains fairly even across the county, as shown in Error! Reference source not found., and examples are scattered across a range of soils. 19% are found on Wick 2 Association soil, largely in the fertile north-eastern region famed for its undulating fields of cereals and vegetables (Figure 7). 15% sit on Beccles 1 soil, a clayey and often waterlogged soil found largely in the south of the county. 12% of ‘embedded’ churches are on Burlingham 1 Association, a soil which may be clayey or loamy, and waterlogged or droughty depending on location and treatment. The largest areas of Burlingham 1 are found in the west of the county.

![Figure 7.](image)

*Embedded churches with specific soil types*

When considering ‘embedded’ churches, it should be remembered that field walking evidence indicates that every church marked on Faden’s map was once contained within a settlement, despite how they appear now – they were by and large not intended to be ‘peripheral’ or ‘isolated’. ‘Embedded’ churches give the impression that the location of their associated settlement has remained stable and
never moved. Closer inspection reveals two different explanations for the existence of ‘embedded’ churches: they are within original settlements that had no need to move, or they are the result of a settlement drifting to a new site and building a new church within the settlement. These contradictory options will be discussed in turn.

The ‘common-edge peripheral’ church has been built on the edge of a common, and the settlement has grown away from it, also along the edge of the common. These churches are often found in the same locations as ‘embedded’ churches, suggesting they are minor variations of the same broad patterns of development (Figure 8). Therefore it may be helpful to combine the two categories to reveal a new pattern – when combined, ‘common-edge peripheral’ and ‘embedded’ churches have a fairly even spread across the county, between 19% and 29% in every region. This means they were not the result of one particular set of circumstances, such as soil type or population density, but occurred despite the factors that influenced the differences between ‘isolated’ and ‘peripheral’ churches.

![Figure 8. Common edge peripheral churches with specific soil types](image)
Original Settlement

Barton Bendish, in west Norfolk, is an ‘embedded’ settlement, but it is on a site of long occupation. The settlement appears to almost straddle Newmarket 1 Association and Isleham 2 soils, providing a combination of workable land for many different crops, plus grassland on the lower ground. The field walking evidence shows scattered finds from the Iron Age onwards, waning in the Early Saxon period and reappearing in inconclusive amounts in the Middle Saxon. Although population size has varied, the western end of Barton Bendish has been occupied for several millennia, with substantial finds available from the Late Saxon. The western end also holds the three parish churches all thought to be Middle to Late Saxon constructions.

It is likely that Barton Bendish has never experienced any settlement drift beyond natural expansion. To the south is an open area that Faden has called ‘Barton Fen’, but there are no other signs of a common. The scattered nature of the finds suggests the arable land was adjacent to the settlement. It is most likely that the settlement largely relied on strip commons that have since become roads, and whatever rough meadow the Isleham 2 fen soils provided. Whatever occurred to make other settlements drift was not an issue here.

Starting from Scratch

Wick 2, Beccles 1 and Burlingham 1 Association soils have two particular characteristics that suggest they were usually settled after drift, with a church built in the new settlement. While Wick 2 soils provide excellent arable land, they are usually found on higher ground, with other soils leading down to the rivers. Reference source not found. shows that most ‘embedded’ churches are located away from the river land. Like Wick 2, Burlingham 1 is ‘typically’ found on higher ground, even on the crests of spurs. Meanwhile Beccles 1 is notoriously difficult to farm, with The Soil Survey listing few good working days, droughtiness, waterlogging and problems for different crops.

There is no clear explanation why settlements were late to utilise Burlingham 1 or Wick 2, when both provided excellent soils for medieval arable use, and might be expected to be inhabited from an early period. Many ‘embedded’ churches on these soils may belong to settlements like Barton Bendish that are long-term users of the
site, but the dearth of settlement-specific archaeological surveys makes it currently impossible to distinguish between these ‘original’ settlements and those that have drifted there from another site. A detailed analysis of both the church and soils may help to resolve questions, but for now it must retain some mystery.

Patterns on Beccles 1 lie in the quality of the soil rather than the location. This is a difficult and heavy soil to farm, but developments in agricultural technology and population growth probably made it both possible and necessary to open up. South Norfolk features large ‘invisible’ commons – those shown in Error! Reference source not found. and many are on Beccles 1 soils. Moreover, the majority of ‘embedded’ churches on Beccles 1 are located on the very edges of this soil. These ‘embedded’ settlements were probably established on the edge of a common that has since disappeared. ‘Common-edge peripheral’ churches are also often found on the edges of Beccles 1, different only from many ‘embedded’ because their common is still recognisable in 1797.

What this shows is a settlement moving by necessity to the edge of newly opened Beccles 1 land, building a new church within the settlement, and taking on the appearance of an original ‘embedded’ settlement. The construction of a new church is the only difference between such a settlement and an ‘isolated’ one. Error! Reference source not found. shows that only ‘embedded’ and ‘common-edge peripheral’ settlements appear with any regularity on Beccles 1 soils – 15% are ‘common-edge peripheral’, and only 7% ‘isolated’. South-east Norfolk particularly saw significant population growth during the Drift Period, corroborated by Error! Reference source not found..xix This map shows high population in this region, with a strip of maximum population around Fritton and no population immediately to the south, suggestive of an uninhabited common.xx Although both sets of data are somewhat problematic, this is not an isolated occurrence – it repeats elsewhere and therefore gains credibility. Demonstrable high population, a clear soil-category relationship and visible common shapes show that south-eastern ‘embedded’ and ‘common-edge peripheral’ churches are a result of incursions onto the commons.

Loddon provides one example of an ‘embedded’ church built after the establishment of the settlement. The current building, Holy Trinity, replaced St Mary’s Chapel in the fifteenth century. This earlier church dates to at least 1289, and there is reference to a church in Loddon in Domesday Book.xxx It sits on Burlingham 1
in the Chet Valley, and a series of sites to the west display signs of Middle to Late Saxon westward movement. Surviving boundaries in this region are suggestive of a common edge. There was also been some migration from the south end of Loddon northwards and downhill to the River Chet. These southern sites were abandoned at the end of the Early Saxon period, a pattern observed on several Anglo-Saxon sites across Norfolk. What this reveals is a settlement moving to the green river-edge pastures, where livestock can be fed, as on a common. There are finds that indicate some continuous use of the river-edge land, but their extent is hidden under the town. It is not known when the first church was built on this site, but the early dating of this drift makes it more likely that construction was concurrent with or after it.

The finds maps show a settlement disappearing from the southern site and reappearing in the north, but without any indication of whether there was another church that has since disappeared. It is clear that the settlement was reaching for the pastures, but it is unclear about whether it gradually moved there or if it was pushed across arable lands to a new site. Both of these processes of drift are observed in Norfolk, and the differences between them are embodied in ‘peripheral’ and ‘isolated’ churches.

Barton Bendish and Loddon demonstrate the nature of an ‘embedded’ church – it has either survived throughout the centuries, on the resources available, or it was built after the settlement drifted to the common-edge and established a new centre there. Barton Bendish shows that some sites were adequate for serving the community for thousands of years. Loddon demonstrates that, despite appearances, an ‘embedded’ church may have been affected by drift. Both appear to have been influences by the availability of pasture, although the significance of that becomes a little clearer when looking at ‘peripheral’ and ‘isolated’ churches.

‘Peripheral’

A ‘peripheral’ church is still connected to the settlement, but stands at one end or side, as if the settlement has grown away from the church (Figure 9). These churches are dominant in the west and central north of the county, on soil profiles that bear significant similarities to those of ‘embedded’ churches. Burlingham 1 and Wick 2 are popular soils (16% and 10% respectively), with Isleham 2 at 12%. The previous
discussion about Burlingham 1 and Wick 2 has equal application to ‘peripheral’ churches as ‘embedded’.

One key difference between ‘embedded’ and ‘peripheral’ churches is their proximity to water sources. Accurate water source information is particularly hard to find, and does not reliably describe the situation in the Middle Ages, but the prevalence of low-lying or marshy soils, such as Isleham 2, Wallsea 1, Agney, Wisbech, Blackwood and Hanworth (totalling 19%) describes a set of river-edge settlements. Contrast this with the number of embedded churches on these soils, 13%, and a pattern of ‘peripheral’ churches on lower ground near water sources emerges. Burlingham 1 and Wick 2 are often found on hillsides, so ‘peripheral’ churches may simply be on a lower elevation, closer to the water, than their ‘embedded’ counterparts.
‘Peripheral’ churches constitute 35-38% of all the churches in the west and central north of Norfolk (Error! Reference source not found.). The population of this area was demonstrably lower during the Drift Period, and it has the largest concentration of invisible commons (Error! Reference source not found.). The churches are widely spread across the landscape in this region, forming borders between large open areas. By again visualising the region as a series of large blocks of uninhabited land from which farmland was gradually taken, it is seen that churches and settlements here were once located within a system of enormous commons accessible to all. Where there is a low Drift Period population, there are also large areas of invisible common, and the highest proportion of ‘peripheral’ churches. This area was one of specialised grazing during this period, accounting for the wide expanses of land.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Two churches in Wade-Martins’ Launditch study demonstrate the causes and effects of ‘peripheral’ drift. Mileham church is located on Beccles 1 and is found at the eastern end of a settlement that stretches along a road.\textsuperscript{xxv} Finds indicated that the church was established within a settlement just south of this road that then moved north to the road in the ninth century. Faden shows a common at the west end of this street that he credits to Mileham, and the settlement stretches towards this area. The Saxon settlement, however, did not reach as far as Faden’s common edge, it was only after the construction of a motte and bailey castle in the twelfth century that it continued westwards.\textsuperscript{xxvi} It is likely, however, that a part of the common was taken into the castle land and traces have not survived.

The puzzle here is why the settlement moved north from the church. If it was heading for the common, there is no obvious reason why it could not spread out from the Middle Saxon site. Instead the settlement moves north by 10 metres and re-establishes itself there. Wade-Martins states ‘except for the church itself, there is nothing in the present village plan which can have been influenced by the site of the early village.’\textsuperscript{xxvii} Roads and commons, however, were considered one and the same until relatively recently – in 1600 some green lanes in Pulham St Mary Magdalen were called ‘The Common Pasture of Pulham’.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Routes have always been necessary for travel, droving and trading, and it is possible that Mileham moved north to the pre-existing thoroughfare, perhaps because of its use as a strip of common.

Pottery finds increase in size and occurrence from the Middle Saxon onwards, suggesting significant population growth. Throughout Norfolk during this period
there was increased pressure on the land to provide for growing numbers, and more common and waste land were taken in for ploughing. When widespread common land was being lost, it appears that settlements moved closer to the established strip that served as both pasture and road. As more surrounding common was converted, the settlement gradually stretched along the boundaries of the protected strip, but also reached out to the larger areas at the western end to provide more resources. Faden shows Mileham Wood to the north of the road, and a wide junction that may once have formed a common boundary west of the castle mound. By remembering the change from open and unploughed to enclosed, it is easier to see a pattern of commons shrinking away from settlements, leaving their residents reaching out for supplies.

Tittleshall is sited north-west of Mileham, also on Beccles 1 soils. It is now a large parish, having amalgamated with three other surrounding parishes in the post-Medieval period. North-west of the village is Tittleshall Common, with one strip leading down into the settlement and regular field boundaries surrounding it, suggesting more recent enclosure. A 1596 map records an area called Peakhall Green to the north of the church. It is contained within the same roads as Tittleshall Common, and the two were probably once part of a large area of wasteland.

The church stands at one end of the main street, with the 1596 village stretched down the entire length towards a crossroads. Tithe maps show this to be a wide and uneven intersection (Figure 10). The southbound road meets a Roman road at another open intersection, this one with a small water feature. By the mid-nineteenth century this junction has been partially enclosed. These two features suggest the former existence of a common in this direction. The area was ‘scattered’ with commons in 1596, and many survive into the late 18th century because of low population density, accompanied by less pressure to enclose all wasteland for arable use. Nevertheless, the majority of commons here are found on edge of the parish, on higher ground.
Field-walking shows that this was a common-focussed settlement, gravitating towards particular areas, despite the abundance of open land available. The church is thought to be pre-Domesday, and the settlement moves from one side to another, suggesting long-term usage of that site. The first detectable settlement was a Middle Saxon one that stretched north from the church towards Peakhall Green, reaching it in the Medieval Period. At a similar time, a settlement grew westwards along the road, from the church to the crossroads. This implies that the settlement had accessible common close to the church, but required a little more, perhaps in a larger contained area than a green lane could provide.

Mileham and Tittleshall demonstrate the normal pattern for a ‘peripheral’ settlement, stretching out from their church along a road, towards a larger common. The comparatively low population allows areas to retain strips of common, but larger areas are still required for intense wood gathering or grazing – commons were worked very hard by the local populations. The ‘green lanes’ may also have been wider on these clayey soils, which ended to turn to ‘quagmires’ when overused and under-maintained. In these conditions a wider road would be more effective for easing
the load and reducing the wear, but also provided more land for the use of the settlement.

These separate factors – lower populations, lower land pressure, wider green strips – created the ‘peripheral’ church. With the former two came the ability to be more discerning about land use – there was not the push to use every square metre that is a pattern more typical of ‘isolated’ settlements. While all settlement categories display a tendency to have commons at the edges of the parish, the ‘peripheral’ ones have the luxury of green strip roads leading to them that could serve both as common and roadway. This could serve the daily needs of the settlement, while also providing access to the larger common areas at the end. The settlements followed these strips to the common at the end, gradually spreading away from the church, but never needing to move away entirely.

‘Isolated’

The isolated church standing at least 500 metres away from the nearest cluster of buildings (Figure 11) is a dominant feature in east and central-south Norfolk. In all 37% of churches in north-east Norfolk are categorised as ‘isolated’, compared to 10% in the south-west. In the more populous east, settlements were forced away from their churches by land pressures and enclosure, while the western ‘isolated’ settlements bear more resemblance to ‘embedded’ settlements, lacking only the church. Two examples, Witton in the east and Longham in the west, demonstrate the difference between these types.
The soil profile of ‘isolated’ settlements is very similar to that of ‘embedded’ and ‘peripheral’ churches – the most common soils are Burlingham 1 and Wick 2, as well as Wick 3, a soil found almost exclusively in the north-east of Norfolk. While 15% of ‘embedded’ churches are found on Beccles 1, only 7% of ‘isolated’ are located here – despite the dominance of Beccles 1 in the south, the majority of ‘isolated’ churches are still found on the more workable Burlingham 1. ‘Isolated’ churches are found mostly on fertile and well-drained soils – farmland suited to pre-mechanised agriculture. Just as ‘embedded’ are often found close to the boundaries of Beccles 1, ‘isolated’ are often sited very close to the boundaries of Burlingham 1 and Beccles 1.

The north-east was the most populous area of Norfolk in the Late Saxon Period, with a church every couple of kilometres in some parts. There were far fewer large spaces devoid of churches than are found in the west – Mousehold Heath and the Hevingham common are among the few clear examples. While the west retains the traces of large connected tracts of Saxon-era wastes and common grazing, the east shows a tight web of settlements with small commons dotted throughout. Most
settlements appear to have some common land attributed to them, even if it is only a small amount. Tithe maps show how the common fits into the layout of the settlement – right on the parish boundary with enclosed land cutting in (Figure 12). It is almost impossible to know how far the commons had receded in each settlement by Faden’s day, but there is a clear pattern of the common being enclosed from the inside outwards.

Along with high population came high demand for land. Land ownership in east Norfolk was the most fragmented in the county, so the parcels of land were also the smallest. Owners enclosed large areas of wasteland to increase their yields, with arable land prioritised over commons. The peasants still had obligations to their lords, owing food and duties, all requiring large areas of arable land. This did not lessen their need for commons however, so there was a constant struggle to keep a balance between the different land uses. Commons in east Norfolk tended to straddle parish boundaries, such as Coltishall joining Belaugh, or Westwick with Worstead.
While the west had large settlements with the flexibility to keep wider green lanes and less land pressure to economise land use, the east has small settlements that had to be worked efficiently to perform adequately. This does not mean they were planned, but rather they developed organically, as the most accessible land was ploughed and the green lanes used as commons. Here the west diverged from the east, as the eastern population grew more, and these strips of commons became inadequate. With more people came higher traffic, a tighter land squeeze and pressure to enlarge fields and reduce lane width. The outlying areas had not yet been enclosed, their use as commons increased, and gradually people started to move to these common edges to both use them and protect them from enclosure. Eventually the population here would reach a critical mass and become self-sustaining, pulling in the old settlement, which faded from use, leaving only the church.

Witton sits in the north-east of Norfolk, on the fertile loams of Wick 2 Association, in an area dominated by ‘isolated’ churches. Archaeological evidence suggest there was a growing Saxon settlement on the site beside the church, with agriculture expanding into the surrounding land over the same period. By the Medieval period the settlement spread out to the northern boundary, with the church retaining its central position within a scattered community.

Faden’s map shows Witton church as ‘isolated’, with the buildings based along the common edge in the east, and a large park adjacent to the west. The archaeological survey does not record movement to this common edge, but sees it in the north and east. The presence of Witton Park has probably influenced the area, taken in from wasteland and some fields. The Inclosure Map of 1812 reveals some small scraps of woodland at the northern parish boundary of the settlement not shown on Faden’s map, with a ‘Public Road’ and ‘Ancient Driftway’ running through the centre, suggesting there may have been common in that area (Figure 13). This is an area of Wick 2 soils, productive agricultural land – again agricultural growth appears to control settlement patterns.
Not only do the soils indicate high production, but the scale of the isolation also shows the size of the farming land. From the church to both north and east boundaries is 800-1500m as the crow flies, a fifteen minute walk on a track in bad conditions. There would be certain advantages to living closer to the common than to the church: protection of grazing stock; ready access to fuel and building supplies; keeping guard against encroachment by neighbouring parishes, to name a few.

Longham, examined by Wade-Martins as part of his Launditch report, also features an ‘isolated’ church, this time in the west on the boundary of Burlingham 1 and Beccles 1 soils. The settlement is focused around two commons – Kirtling Common and South Hall Green, which are connected by a thin strip along what is now a road. This settlement moved later than some of the others discussed here, and lies towards the west of Norfolk, but still displays signs of having been pulled from one site to another by the combined growth of population and agriculture. The Middle Saxon settlement is smaller than some of the others in the area, but grows to accommodate a potential forty-five tofts by the Medieval Period.
Longham is in an area dominated by ‘peripheral’ churches, but it demonstrates that similar factors are having an effect across the county. In central-northern and western Norfolk ‘isolated’ churches dominate the areas bordering Beccles 1 soils. This bears a similarity to the ‘common-edge peripheral’ churches discussed earlier, and suggests that ‘isolated’ settlements are sometimes only distinguishable from their ‘common-edge peripheral’ or ‘embedded’ Beccles 1 counterparts by their lack of a church. The church in Longham stands completely ‘isolated’ to the north-west of the commons, with ploughed land between it and the settlement. It is on well-drained soil with observed reliable water sources, on the highest ground of the settlement. The commons are on the lower ground to the south, in an area of Beccles 1. The shift from church-side to common-side occurred in the Late Medieval period, after growing to its maximum size, but with some evidence of Early Medieval expansion to areas of South Hall Green.xlix

Longham gives an idea of a broad timeline – the settlement and church grow together during the Middle Saxon, expanding out a little in the Late Saxon. By the Early Medieval the accessible common comprises green lanes, with areas of common at the ends, but the population is growing and the tracts of common become attractive for habitation. The agricultural expansion continues, moving outwards from the settlement and church, expanding over the outlying common, taking out new strips, the traces of which can still be seen in the boundaries. It becomes easier to live on the other side of the settlement, near these furthest fields, where there is more common and less travel to the land. One or two families move out, and the rest of the settlement stays around the church. During the Medieval period more families follow until the scales tip and there are more people living by the common. From that point on it becomes the main settlement, and the area around the church is first abandoned and then ploughed – after all, it is good land.

Witton shows a similar pattern, albeit several centuries earlier, on farming land in a more populous area that began to feel the pressure earlier than the west of the county. The difference between the east and west may be simplified to say that in the east settlements were pushed to the outer edges, forced to ‘leap-frog’ the ploughed land to reach the small commons, while the western settlements drifted to the edges of large tracts of common, pulling the remaining residents in by force of numbers but not building a new church. This is a subtle difference, but it explains why there are
isolated churches in less populous parts of the county where access to common may be more about attraction than necessity.

EXPLANATIONS

This research has highlighted a number of areas that require further investigation – analysis of the role of lords and a closer examination of uses of uninhabited land for example. It does, however, reveal some factors that are significant to each category – soils are important for ‘embedded’ churches, but only secondary to ‘peripheral’. Population growth affects both ‘peripheral’ and ‘isolated’, but the impact is directly related to the amount of land available. Everyone needed access to commons, but the accessibility varied across the county and created regional differences in settlement layout. Every settlement is unique and has been formed from a different combination of the same influences.

- Sufficient resources

The settlement did not experience significant population growth, or the original settlement may have been in the best location in the area to provide for their needs. The settlement has remained in its original location.

- Population growth

Throughout Norfolk there was population growth in the Drift Period, and associated settlement expansion. This increased the areas of ploughed land, reduced the amount of common land closest to the settlement, and made the outlying commons more valuable. Settlements moved to reach the commons, to provide food, fodder and fuel.

- Land pressure

In some areas there was enough land to allow for flexibility in the location of commons, while others struggled to fulfil all the requirements for both the settlement and the lord. Where there was more choice the green lanes could be wider, allowing for more grazing but leading to large open areas for more intensive use. Where the land was highly populated the roads were busier and the strips left by earlier generations were no longer sufficient, settlements jumped over the surrounding arable to the border areas of common that could support them.
- Soils

Soils so not by themselves define the geographical relationship between church and its associated settlement, but they are nevertheless influential. Highly productive soils such as the Wick series tend to have higher populations and smaller estates, increasing the land pressure. More variable soils, such as Burlingham 1 are likely to have larger estates with less land pressure. Very clayey soils, such as Beccles 1, will usually have been opened in later years to host newer settlements and churches. Valley floor and marsh soils will have more settlements that travel towards upland soils, usually where population growth forces expansion.

- Critical mass

A separate common-edge settlement will only dominate after reaching a critical mass, after which it pulls in the remnants from the original settlement. Otherwise it will remain as a few individual buildings on the common edge. This effect is most obvious in ‘isolated’ churches, but also in ‘ peripheral’ settlements as houses are pulled towards the common, down the street rather than over the arable land.

- Status

An ‘isolated’ settlement may build a new church it is had the wealth or motives, and it would then become ‘embedded’. The territory may have been divided after the drift occurred, and any early church absorbed into a new neighbouring parish. Traces may still exist in place names, on maps, or as archaeological evidence. Alternatively there may never have been a church in the early settlement, or it may have completely disappeared in the thousand years since abandonment.

CONCLUSION

While the ‘embedded’ church can be ambiguous, the ‘isolated’ church is an incontrovertible signal that a settlement has moved from its original location to a common edge some distance away. How a settlement came to be shaped depended on different factors. Population and land availability were important catalysts for settlement movement, but the only factor influencing every settlement across Norfolk was access to common land – this resource determined the survival of the community. This history of communities on the move is revealed by the careful mapping of evidence at a county level. In particular this study has shown the importance of
explaining settlement patterns in relation to each other. It is only possible to explain the differences through an integrated assessment of several sources, from soil types to field walking. The difference between an ‘isolated’ settlement being ‘pushed’ or ‘pulled’ is only observed when compared to other categories.

The importance of common in the Saxon and Medieval periods cannot be overstated, as it was access to this resource that drove settlements towards it, in whatever manner was necessary. In the west there was space for settlements to expands towards areas of common grazing, while still remaining attached to the church. In the east, land was under more pressure and settlements were forced to jump over the arable to the nearest large blocks of common. The evidence of this movement remains today.

The relationship of parish church to settlements is therefore both revealing and corroborative. Whether it is ‘peripheral’ or ‘isolated’, it helps tell the individual story of a settlement, the pressures, responses, conditions of the site in Late Saxon and Medieval times. But such an analysis also substantiates theories about population growth and the county-wide patterns of this period. Where previously the ‘isolated’ church has been seen as an East Anglian curiosity, interesting but not valuable, this study has shown that it is a signpost to settlement growth, influence and movement throughout a tumultuous period of history.
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ii With thanks to Alistair Macnair for providing the digitised version of Faden’s map.


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