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# 1

## Introducing thorps

Thorps – in some areas *throps* – are familiar elements in the named landscape of much of England. In many instances they announce themselves to visitors and passers-by proudly and without disguise: Althorp NTH, the focus of national attention in 1997; or Mablethorpe LIN, seaside destination for land-locked Midlanders and inspiration for Tennyson's eponymous poem (Figure 1.1). Elsewhere they lie hidden from view behind a variety of spellings, only to be discovered by those who enquire within: Cock-a-Troop Cottages WLT; Eastrip SOM; Droop DOR; Burdrop OXF; Thrupp, Hatherop and Puckrup GLO.

Unlike places taking other commonly encountered generic name elements, such as *-hām* or *-tūn*, *-worth* or *-burh*, *-lēah* or *-feld*, *thorps* and *throps* are synonymous with the English countryside. When seen on road signs, they invariably point towards villages, hamlets or individual farms. Today only Scunthorpe LIN is a



Figure 1.1 Postcard of the beach and dunes at Mablethorpe LIN.



Figure 1.2 The early stages of urbanisation at Scunthorpe captured on the first edition OS map, 1889–90.

town of any size, having grown from a small village with the establishment of its iron foundry and the coming of the railway, a process captured by the first edition Ordnance Survey map (Figure 1.2). No other *thorp* or *throp* can compete in size with, say, a Birmingham *WAR* or a Taunton *SOM*, a Tamworth *WAR* or a Market Harborough *NTH*, a Burnley *LAN* or a Mansfield *NTT*. Even places taking the Old Norse term *-bý*, with which the *thorps* are most often associated, can boast in their midst towns such as Derby *DRB*, Grimsby *LIN* and Corby *NTH*.

By contrast, names such as Ringlethorpe *LEI*, Scagglethorpe *YON*, Algarthorpe *DRB* and Buslingthorpe *LIN* conjure up images of small, quiet, bucolic places, an impression rarely betrayed if the traveller turns off the major routes and down rural back lanes to visit them. It is unsurprising, then, to find that poets have found inspiration in their peaceful surroundings. *Thorps* have come to symbolise a bygone age, the lost rural idyll.

Yes, I remember Adlestrop –  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there

Unwontedly. It was late June.  
 The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
 No one left and no one came  
 On the bare platform. What I saw  
 Was Adlestrop – only the name.  
 And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
 And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
 No whit less still and lonely fair  
 Than the high cloudlets in the sky.  
 And for that minute a blackbird sang  
 Close by, and round him, mistier,  
 Farther and farther, all the birds  
 Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>1</sup>

The *thorp* heartland lies north and east of the line of Watling Street, now the A5, and comprises the north-east Midland counties of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire and north-east Northamptonshire (Figure 1.3). These were the Five Boroughs of the Danelaw, where Scandinavian influence in place-naming is most clear. Some sense of their density in the medieval landscape can be gauged from sources such as the Leicestershire Survey, compiled c.1130: in the small administrative unit of Seal Hundred, no more than a few square miles in extent, we find no fewer than four *thorps* – Boothorpe, Donisthorpe, Oakthorpe and Osgathorpe.<sup>2</sup> *Thorps* are and were thick on the ground in Yorkshire and Norfolk too. In these various settings the words of another of Tennyson's poems find resonance:

By thirty hills I hurry down  
 Or slip between the ridges  
 By twenty *thorps*, a little town  
 And half a hundred bridges<sup>3</sup>

Although conspicuous by their near-total absence in Cambridgeshire, outlying *thorps* are found in Northumberland and Cumbria, and some even spill over south and west of Watling Street – but this is really *throp* (rather than *thorp*) country, and

- 1 A.G. Thomas, *The collected poems of Edward Thomas* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 71–3. A landscape historian might point out that in 1917, when the poem was first published, Adlestrop station was located on the borders of Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. The nearest Oxfordshire bird was one mile away and inaudible!
- 2 C.F. Slade, *The Leicestershire Survey c. AD 1130: a new edition*, Department of English Local History Occasional Papers 7 (Leicester, 1956), p. 19.
- 3 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'The Brook', in *Maud and other poems* (London, 1869), p. 118.

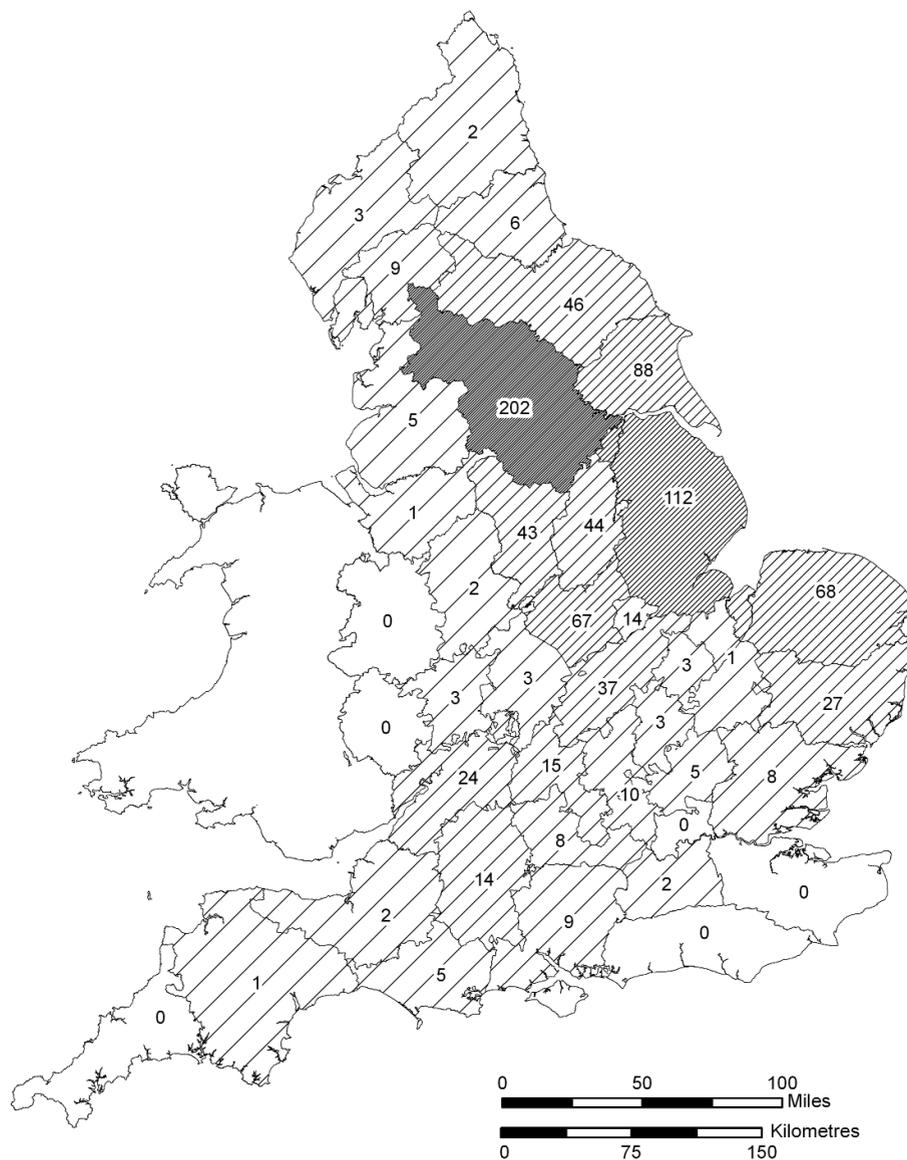


Figure 1.3 Density of *thorps* and *throps* mapped by historic county.

certainly becomes so the further one leaves the Roman road and the Danelaw behind. There are notable concentrations of such names in Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, while surrounding counties such as Dorset, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire have their own

smattering of *thorp* names too. Isolated on the south-western edge of their distribution is a single example in south Devon.

This book is about these places. It will challenge the current consensus that *thorps* have always been marginal settlements in the English countryside. What is presented develops existing work by integrating linguistic, archaeological and topographical approaches and, for the first time, treats both the *thorps* of the Danelaw and the *throps* of the south together. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship between the *thorps* and the *throps*. Do similar name-types represent two distinct and unconnected groups of settlements operating in different ways within the pre-Conquest landscape? Or are they so closely interrelated that they belong together and represent a single settlement phenomenon? We will show that it is possible to suggest a context for the creation of these place-names which locates them – in both time and space – in a rapidly developing English landscape. Far from being simple by-products of these events, we will propose that these apparently unassuming places may have played an integral and active part in the changes that revolutionised agricultural practice across a large belt of the country between c.850 and 1250.

### *Histories and approaches*

There is much of interest to be extracted from the later histories of the *thorps* and *throps*, in their contrasting fates or continuing tenacity to exist within the English countryside in the face of social and economic change. And it is often in the better-recorded periods that clues to their undocumented origins – the principal concern of this book – may be found. Consequently, what can be gleaned of the form and function of *thorps* and *throps* in the later medieval period is a critical starting point for any retrogressive analysis which seeks to elucidate their beginnings. Nor should we ignore their post-medieval histories. As a group of settlements, *thorps* and *throps* have tended, over the last 500 or so years, to share a narrow set of common experiences. Some have simply been consumed by growing towns and cities: Shelthorpe and Thorpe Acre LE1, engulfed by the expansion of Loughborough, are just two examples. This is nothing new, however; Clementhorpe YOE was described in a coroner's inquest of 1377 as *in suburbia Ebor'* (York) (Figure 1.4).<sup>4</sup> Proximity to urban centres has also led some *thorps* to grow rapidly during the twentieth century, as these once-rural places have become dormitories for their larger neighbours. Such has been the experience of Countesthorpe, just south of Leicester. By contrast, many others, particularly those located away from the major centres of population and industry, have just not

4 C. Gross (ed.), *Select cases from the coroner's rolls, AD 1265–1413*, Selden Society 9 (London, 1896), p. 120.