



Viewpoint

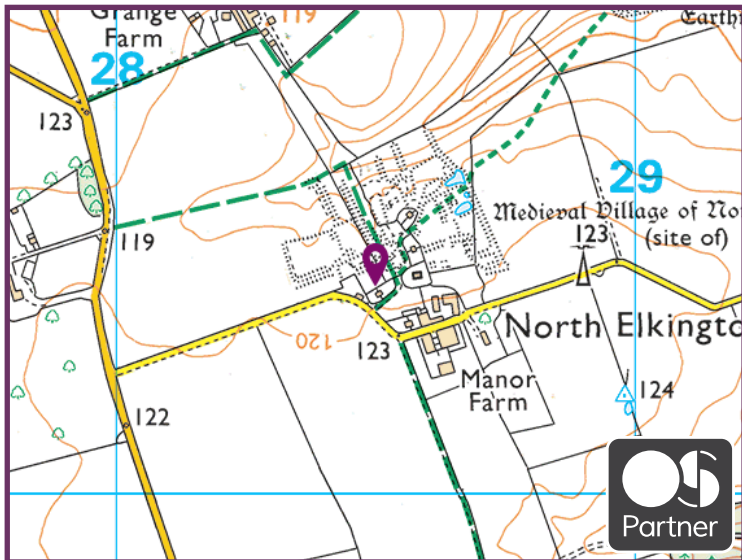
Shadows of the past



Time: 15 mins

Region: East Midlands

Landscape: rural



Location: North Elkington, Lincolnshire

Grid reference: TF 28500 90400

Getting there: There is a layby on the unclassified road about 500 metres west of North Elkington. From the west, the layby is just before the village sign.

Directions: From the layby, head towards the village. After the road turns right, take the public footpath to the left. The village remains are visible after about 75 metres.

Gaze across the surrounding fields. Although we are in the hilly Lincolnshire Wolds, the hummocky ground here still looks a little unusual. These 'bumps' are actually the remains of an abandoned village. Can you spot a sunken track through the field? This was probably the main road. This 'hollow way' was worn down by footsteps, hooves and cart wheels and is still recognisable as a path.

Now take a look at the banks of earth. These are all that remain of houses that once stood here. There are deserted settlements all over Britain and many of them date back to the 14th century. In fact the Lincolnshire Wolds has one of the greatest concentrations of these lost medieval villages.

What caused people to abandon their homes and communities?



When the deserted villages were first investigated in the mid-20th century, the cause was often thought to be the Black Death. The Black Death (1348-50) was a plague that killed around 40% of England's population. It followed a series of poor summers and bad harvests that caused widespread starvation. The 14th century was certainly a tough time.

But there were other factors in the medieval period that led to declining populations and villages becoming abandoned. After the Black Death, the remaining agricultural labourers were in high demand and their wages rose. To avoid these costs big landowners sought ways to use their land that did not need so many workers.

Some found an answer in replacing two-legged occupants with four-legged ones. Many landowners forced the remaining villagers out to make way for the sheep. Just one shepherd could tend many sheep and wool exporting was becoming a very profitable business.

Other agricultural spaces were converted to parkland and used for keeping deer. Deer were hunted or sometimes caught in nets. Deer meat, venison, was a very high status food and therefore a profitable source of income.

The decline in population was not always so sudden though. Sometimes a village population simply dropped away to zero as people moved elsewhere in search of work. In less productive agricultural areas, the reduced population meant that it was no longer necessary to farm the poorer land.

In fact, there are many reasons for deserted villages. Since written sources are scarce we may never know the precise story for each settlement. Despite the uncertainty, one thing is clear. These events meant the end of an old way of life. Settlement patterns and farming methods changed forever - and these changes still affect what we can see in the landscape today.

A bird's eye view

Many deserted medieval villages were first found through aerial photography. From this perspective high above the ground, unusual patterns become clear.

With today's technology you can do some investigating yourself. Try looking at satellite images of deserted villages for bumps in the ground or on 1:25000 Ordnance Survey maps, where you may be able to identify roads, smallholdings and buildings. There may be one near your home.

