

# Moated Medieval Sites

P. J. ATKINS

The purpose of this short article is to point to the main themes in the literature on *Moated Medieval Sites* (M.M.S.) and to suggest that one of these approaches deserves more attention than it has, hitherto, received.

According to F. V. Emery<sup>1</sup> there are approximately three to four thousand M.M.S. in England, recorded in the works of the Victoria County Histories, the Ordnance Survey, and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. B. K. Roberts' map<sup>2</sup>, and the comparison he makes with the distribution of mottes, illustrate the complexity of the pattern. The overall spread of moated sites, disregarding sub-types, does not appear to be correlated with areas of strategic significance in medieval times in the way that mottes cluster in the Welsh Marches, but there do seem to be concentrations in certain lowland areas of heavy-clay soils.

Chronologically the construction of M.M.S. was concentrated in the period between 1150 and 1400, especially in the late thirteenth century and the opening years of the fourteenth century. This was near the end of a period of expansion of the cultivated area, particularly by the clearing of woodland on the heavier, marginal soils of the lowlands.

Roberts' illuminating study<sup>3</sup> of forest clearing and colonisation in the Forest of Arden throws light upon the processes involved in the evolution of a moated landscape. He traces from the eleventh century to the early fourteenth century three phases of colonisation:

- (1) The development and expansion of open-field systems by assarting on the margins of the cultivated land. This occurred before the late twelfth century.
- (2) A period of concerted clearing by free colonists, with charters issued by the larger landlords, between about 1180 and the middle of the thirteenth century.
- (3) The rise of a class of small landowners, living in large moated farmsteads, in the years between the mid-thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

Several writers have explored the possible reasons for the construction of these moated sites<sup>4</sup>. They may be summarised as follows:

- (i) The narrow nature of a moat made it ideal for use as a fishpond, or as a drinking pool for cattle; it could be easily fished and cleaned out<sup>5</sup>.
- (ii) A defensive feature, for protection against wild animals, robbers, or civil disruption<sup>6</sup>.
- (iii) A fire-break, whether to prevent damage by forest-fires or, conversely, to contain conflagrations within the homestead itself.
- (iv) A dry building site with a convenient drain, reservoir and sewer.

(v) A fashionable innovation, or a feature of 'cultural inertia'. It is not difficult to find evidence to support each of these possibilities, indeed with some sites a combination of motives seems likely. Single cause explanations are dangerous in a context of dynamic social change, especially when environmental conditions are considered of paramount explanatory importance rather than as limits within which several different developments may occur. D. G. and J. G. Hurst favour one factor:

'[The fourteenth century] . . . was a period of worsening climate after the climatic optimum which had lasted from the ninth century to the thirteenth century. With the possible increase in the height of the water table wide moats may have become a necessity . . .'<sup>7</sup>

One can, however, counter such generalisations. It is often true that medieval moats are sited in the localities most amenable to satisfactory drainage, suggesting that their builders wished to preserve the level of water in the ditch rather than merely to keep the mound, if there was one, dry in adverse conditions. Ironically, Emery notes that ' . . . in some regions, moats seem necessary because of lack of water, especially for livestock. The study of tree rings has recently shown that thirteenth century England experienced years of severe drought.'<sup>8</sup> The fact that M.M.S. were constructed throughout these periods of climatic fluctuation suggests that the environmental conditions were probably secondary in importance to other factors. Indeed from Ireland Glasscock reports that 'the theory that in England climatic deterioration may have encouraged moat-building has no supporting evidence in Ireland.'<sup>6</sup>

Some moats are fed by water from outside, either by a leat, as at Alvechurch, or by a spring such as at Bushwood Hall, Warwickshire, where Roberts detected conscious motives in siting: '[The moat of] Bushwood Hall . . . which is cunningly sited at the junction of Arden Sandstone and the impervious Keuper Marl, is fed by a spring.'<sup>9</sup> While it seems likely that reasons for the actual decision to construct a moat varied considerably in both time and space, it does seem possible to suggest an underlying social motivation which brings to the study of M.M.S. a degree of coherence. This motivation was the desire of a distinct social group of free men, landowners in a small way, to be fashionable. One may, therefore, see the clustering of M.M.S. in certain areas and in certain periods not as a response to environmental 'necessity', but as emerging for social reasons in these areas and times.

Because moats must have been expensive to excavate they were probably only available to the more successful families who would afford this demonstration of wealth, but who were not able to build a castle<sup>10</sup>. G. Duby has shown how this may have represented the diffusion of a fashion through the social hierarchy: 'The castle keep . . . To begin with it was a royal monopoly . . . during the twelfth century, keeps became less rare . . . and by the end of the century ordinary knights also began to put up small keeps, to dig

moats around their houses and to make their ancestral dwellings into strongholds, replicas in miniature of the great princely fortress.'<sup>11</sup>

This process is also mooted by Glasscock in Ireland where 'there are distinct parallels between the moated sites and the almost-square castles with high curtain walls and corner towers . . .'. Thus he asks ' . . . is the rectangular moated site a poor man's earth-and-wood version of the keepless castles of the late thirteenth century.'<sup>6</sup>

Plate 1 (Fig. 1) shows the chronological distribution of the construction of M.M.S. in Yorkshire<sup>12</sup>. This curve displays the S-shape so often associated with the diffusion of innovations<sup>13</sup>. These figures are, however, unlikely to be complete since some sites may remain undetected while others have been destroyed. In consequence one cannot necessarily infer a process of cumulative adoption without more evidence. Yet a number of such curves drawn for different areas, supported by documentary and archaeological evidence, would prove of great interest.

Drawing these threads together, a new approach to the problem of M.M.S. seems necessary:

(i) M.M.S. are most often concentrated in certain lowland areas with heavy clay soils. It seems less likely that this was a response to the need to preserve water levels in the moats than to the fashion of a social group who were most likely to want to afford them.

(ii) The argument that wide moats became a 'necessity' in times of 'worsening' climate is not helped by the fact that M.M.S. were built throughout a long period of fluctuations in climate<sup>14</sup>.

(iii) Duby has suggested the way in which moated sites may have become fashionable in certain social strata in medieval times. The regularities observed by the diffusion theorists may prove valuable in analysing not only the temporal pattern, as illustrated by the tentative S-curve, but also the spatial and hierarchical spread of the innovation. (Plate 1, Fig. 2.)

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  8. Emery (1962), *op. cit.*, 384.
  9. Roberts (1962), *op. cit.*, 30.
  10. For instance the Archer family, mentioned by Roberts (1968), *op. cit.*
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  12. The data for this figure were kindly supplied by Mrs. H. E. J. Le Patourel whose monograph, *Some Moated Medieval Sites in Yorkshire*, is forthcoming in the series of the Society for Medieval Archaeology.
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FIGURE 1.

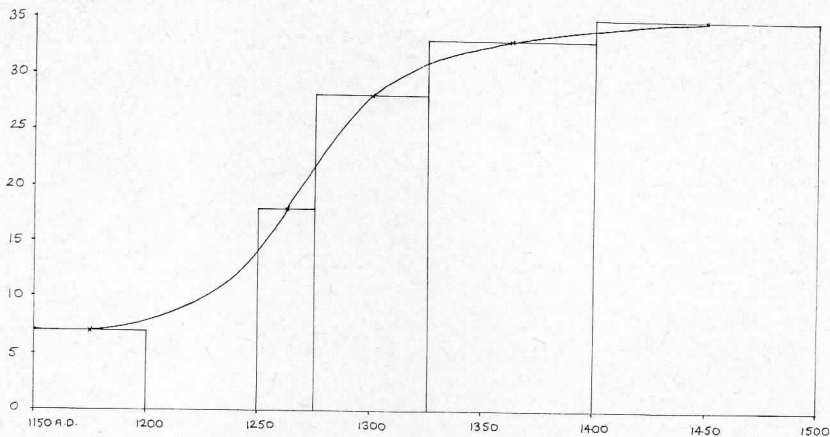


FIGURE 2.

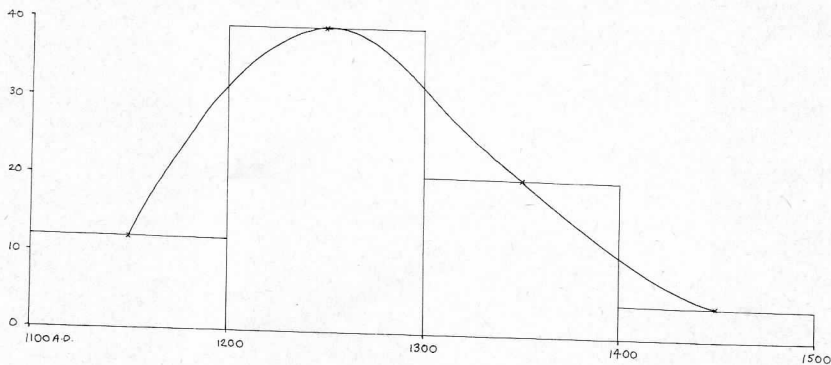


PLATE 1

Fig. 1: A cumulative curve showing the number of M.M.S. constructed during certain periods in part of Yorkshire.

Fig. 2: A curve showing the number of moats datable to four centuries.  
(Figures drawn by Mrs. Le Patourel from the reports of excavations made outside Yorkshire)