We can only learn about larger historical changes by understanding particular places, which justifies subjecting the parish, manor and village of Bibury to careful scrutiny. Like many Cotswold villages, it is well served both by archaeological research and by the survival of documents. The long-term history of the English countryside is now conventionally told in terms of the rise and fall of great estates, served by important minster churches, first documented in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. The estates inherited a settled countryside from the Roman period, and were designed to extract revenues, in the form of tribute in kind, from the local population. (1) They were subdivided internally from the beginning, and towards the end of the first millennium broke up into small manorial, village and parochial territories. (2) From the eleventh century onwards the tenants of the manors are revealed paying rents and doing services for their lords, and that relationship developed until the heyday of serfdom and demesnes directly managed by lords in the thirteenth century. (3) The inhabitants of villages, often the same people as the manorial tenants, can be seen up to about 1300 cultivating the fields and organising their communities, in an expanding economy in which population and commercial activity grew. (4) In more uncertain times from the early fourteenth to the early sixteenth century the number of people fell and the principal product of the land, grain, declined in price. At the same time the lords exercised diminishing control over their tenants and lands. (5) The landscape is often seen as reflecting these changes, as villages were formed and open fields extended in the period of the creation of smaller manors and economic growth. (6) The period of reduced population and agricultural profits after 1350 saw rapid landscape change with the shrinkage or desertion of villages, and fields were adapted to new circumstances, sometimes by enclosure. (7)

Bibury in many ways accords with that general picture of changes in landscape and society. It became, indeed, an archetype of a Cotswold village, as in the late nineteenth century it featured in a book by Gibbs, and won approving comments from William Morris, which helped to persuade the outside world to admire and visit the village and the Cotswold region. (8) In modern times the church, Bibury Court, the cottages and their picturesque setting provide the attraction. In early
periods the sheltered river valley with its meadow, and the cultivable land and good pasture on the hills encouraged settlement. This is demonstrated in prehistoric and Roman times by archaeological evidence of scatters of flint and pottery, and of earthworks and crop marks. The prehistoric burial mounds are found on the hills, and the Romano-British settlements both on the upland and in the valley.(9) There were good communications in the Roman period and the middle ages, with Akeman Street running from Cirencester along the southern edge of Bibury, and the main road north-east from Cirencester crossing the river Coln and heading in the direction of Burford, Oxford and London. A salt way crossed the hills north of the village running from north-west to south-east. (10) (see Fig.1)

It was much more than a well-sited village, but an important central place in south-east Gloucestershire – a Roman villa, an earlier fortified centre, a minster church, and the head of both a large estate and a hundred. The Iron Age fort of Rawbarrow in the valley south of Ablington may have been an early centre of authority over that part of the Coln valley, and in the Roman period an opulent villa stood near the river at Bibury mill.(11) In the early eighth century a grant of land was made to an aristocrat, Leppa, who was succeeded by his daughter Beage.(12) Her name appears as the first element in the place-name of the village, and the second element points to the existence of a burh or fortification.(13) The -bury may derive from a defended Iron Age site; it could refer to a residence for Beage or a predecessor surrounded by a ditch and bank. The unusual transaction between the bishop and Leppa may have been connected with the foundation of a minster church, which appears to have been in existence by the ninth century. Material evidence helps to fill the gap between the fourth and eighth centuries, as the only Roman site in the vicinity to be thoroughly excavated, the villa at Barnsley Park, has produced evidence of a field system in use for perhaps two centuries after 400, and early Anglo-Saxon burials have been found at Ready Token on Akeman Street.(14) A plausible hypothesis would regard the early medieval estate centre at Bibury as succeeding the Roman villa, and there could have been continuous use of territorial boundaries, which were marked by prehistoric barrows on the hills.(15)

The early eighth-century charter refers to a rather large land unit of 15 hides, from which 5 hides were being detached for Leppa. Later evidence of territorial, tenurial and ecclesiastical connections points to Bibury’s very large estate, containing the territory later belonging to Ablington, Aldsworth, Arlington, Barnsley, Eycot,
Wall and Winson. (16) (see Fig. 2) In Domesday (1086) the hideage assessment of these places totalled 44. By then attachments to other pieces of land may have been forgotten: a charter of 855 implies an association with Poulton and Eysey to the south of Bibury, later in Wiltshire. (17) The original name of the estate in the eighth and ninth centuries was *Cunuglae* or Coln, after the river, which has survived as a name for villages upstream such as Coln St Denis. Like many river-based estates, its boundaries ran along the watersheds which separated the Coln valley from the Windrush valley to the north, and from the Thames valley to the south. Originally the estate’s lord presumably exploited the resources of its 15 square miles by collecting tributes in kind from its inhabitants. More intensive impositions on land and people were more likely to develop when the estate was broken down into smaller units.

The names of the various fragments of the estate which include personal names point to a process by which parts of it were assigned to different leasehold tenants from the ninth to the eleventh centuries – Eadbald (at Ablington); Ald (at Aldsworth); Aelfred (at Arlington); and so on. (18) We do not need to rely on placename evidence alone for the process of assigning land to individual laymen and clergymen, as charters record grants of Barnsley in c. 800 and of Ablington in 899 and perhaps 962. (19) At the time of Domesday Bibury was a separate hundred which coincided with the great estate, which meant that a court was held for the inhabitants, with the usual responsibilities for maintaining law and order, and for acting as the local organiser of taxation and military service. Hundreds were commonly named after some meeting point away from the main settlements, such as Kiftsgate and Rapsgate both in Gloucestershire, but Bibury’s hundred carried the name of the estate centre, presumably because the court met there. The choice of Bibury to be an early minster reflected its existing significance as the focus of an estate. Its pre-Conquest greatness can still be glimpsed in the fabric of the parish church, which retains large sections of a substantial building of the tenth or eleventh century, which was associated with high quality sculptures. (20) At the time of this building work the church was no longer an independent monastery but a major parish church; it still however appears in Domesday with an unusually rich endowment of 3 hides, and it would have been drawing tithes and other church revenues from much of the old estate. (21)

So far, then, Bibury’s story is a conventional one of a large estate with ancient roots which had come into the hands of a prominent ecclesiastical landowner,
the church of Worcester, before the Norman Conquest. The estate was served by a wealthy minster church. As was normally the case lay families were endowed with parts of the estate, and the bishop retained the core as a demesne manor as a source of produce and income. At this point Bibury’s story diverges somewhat from the conventional, because unlike Bishop’s Cleeve or Withington (on the Worcester estate), or Hawkesbury or Minchinhampton on other church estates, it did not persist as a large and rich demesne manor. The managers of the demesnes had to resolve various problems, and manorial revenues reached only a modest level. The village deteriorated and came near to catastrophe in the period after the Black Death, though as we shall see, the inhabitants had hidden reserves of strength.

* * * * *

The fragmentation of the great Coln estate began early. One should emphasise that it was not a single unit in Roman times, as it was divided between at least two Roman villas, at Bibury itself and Barnsley, so we are not dealing with a primeval unified territory. The earliest charter shows that Bishop Wilfred was in control of Bibury in the early eighth century, but was already leasing land to Leppa and Beage. The lease is remarkable because it refers to Leppa receiving 5 hides, so already the estate already included modestly sized parcels. This was followed by a number of other grants, as we have seen. Ablington, lying as it did beside Bibury, extending from the Coln to the Leach, appears to have been the obvious place to retain as part of the core of the estate. But it was mentioned as a separate piece of land in 855, and the first evidence that it was being granted away dates to 899, but the tenant was a priest, so rather than being inherited within a family it was apparently returned to the lord of Bibury when the lives expired.(22) In Domesday it is not mentioned as a separate place and a near-contemporary Worcester document shows that it was then part of the bishop’s demesne manor.(23) The combination of Bibury and Ablington in 1086 explains the number of tenants and ploughs attached to Bibury, which are greater than we would expect. The bishops received a few rents and labour services from Ablington tenants in the fourteenth century, perpetuating the memory that his lordship had extended over the neighbouring village. (24) In the early twelfth century, however, Ablington was granted to the Meysi family, and passed to the d'Evercys and then the Willingtons (25), which left the bishop with the rather truncated remnant of the estate at Bibury itself, consisting of 1,800 acres and never with more than about 30 peasant tenants. (Fig. 2) This made it one of the smallest of
the bishopric manors, and in 1299 for example, it was valued at £27 per annum compared with annual sums of £46, £55 and £161 from the other Gloucestershire manors of Withington, Cleeve and Henbury.(26)

The obvious question is to ask why so much of the Bibury estate was granted away, and this leads us to enquire into the underlying causes of the fragmentation of land units. Magnates like the bishops were clearly under strong lay pressure, from the king as well as the aristocracy, to relinquish control of land, and while they in theory retained some benefits in terms of services and feudal dues, these seem to be poor compensation. Given that these sacrifices had to be made, one can understand why so much of Bibury, rather than a high proportion of other estates, was surrendered. It lay on the south-eastern corner of the federation of twenty properties stretched over three counties that made up the whole bishopric estate. In the later middle ages the bishops stopped maintaining a residence there as they rarely needed to travel to that part of the diocese. In the relevant period between c. 850 and 1150 pieces detached from the Coln estate were very attractive propositions for their new lay owners. The land was supporting cultivators and agriculture throughout the early middle ages, and each small subdivision could deliver revenues to a lord in produce and labour. The bishopric estates in wooded north Worcestershire, which were thinly settled and contained much uncultivated land before the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, could not be used in the same way to provide productive assets for new lords.(27)

Yet another lord acquired a major asset contained within the former Bibury estate in 1151 when John de Pagham, bishop of Worcester, granted the church of Bibury, together with all its tithes and revenues, to Osney Abbey.(28) This Augustinian house had relatively recently been established, with an estate concentrated in Oxfordshire. The order specialised in acquiring parish churches, which were served by one of their canons instead of a rector, and yielded a good income from glebes, tithes and offerings. The gift of Bibury seems an especially generous act by the bishop, as the huge parish generated an annual revenue comparable with that of the bishop’s own manor. Pagham was also granting away a rectory in the bishop’s patronage which his successors would have used to reward their officials and allies. Henceforth Bibury would be dominated by two large church lords, both with tenants, courts and demesnes to cultivate. One of the lords, the bishop, was remote and impersonal, but Osney was ever present, with its canon a
prominent figure in the village. Pagham’s motives for this grant are not known, but he was not serving the long-term interests of the bishopric.

The bishops lost the varied resources of the old Coln estate, and were left with assets that seem unbalanced in ecological and agricultural terms. Wood, meadow and grazing had all featured among the estate’s assets. Barnsley’s name refers to a clearing in or near woodland. Eycot, a small parcel rated at a hide, was separated from the main block of land, lay near to Colesbourne, 7 miles as the crow flies from Bibury. (Fig. 1) By 1086 this was a small manor with six tenants, two slaves and a total of four ploughs; no reference was made in the survey to wood, but it had probably once been wooded, and was presumably attached to the Coln estate for the sake of its timber and wood. (29) The charter of 855 links Ablington and Barnsley with two places in Wiltshire, one of which, Eysey, lies on the banks of the Thames surrounded with abundant meadows. (Fig. 1) This could have been the source of the Coln estate’s hay in its early years. The break down of the great estate of Coln also reduced the amount of permanent pasture available to Bibury itself. For example a large area at Aldsworth, which in modern times served as a race course, went into the hands of Gloucester Abbey, and Ablington’s common on the ‘downs’ to the northwest of the village was presumably reserved for its own tenants after it separated in the twelfth century. (30)

By the late thirteenth century Bibury itself consisted mainly of arable land stretching for two miles between the rivers Coln and Leach. ‘There is no wood there’, says the survey of c.1290, which was not untypical of the Cotswolds, where woodland was very unevenly distributed. (31) Meadow was confined to the restricted flood plain of the Coln, where the damp ground and occasional rising waters encouraged the grass to grow. Broad Meadow, immediately to the east of the village, church and manor house, was a valuable asset, but it was rather narrow, being measured at 8 acres in the survey of 1299, and the other meadow of Raynesham, described as pasture in 1299 but meadow by 1371, was no larger. (32) Their hay was insufficient to feed all of the lord’s oxen, sheep and other livestock through the winter. This was also a common Cotswold problem. The third feature of Bibury’s ecology, and paradoxically for many other villages in this region famous for its sheep, was the shortage of permanent pasture. (33)

Historians once criticised those who made decisions in medieval agriculture because they cultivated a high proportion of the land, and left insufficient pasture,
leading in the long run to a lack of manure for fertilising the corn fields. Now there is
more appreciation of the way local resources were exploited, and the skill and care
with which agriculture was managed. (34) At Bibury the bishops and their officials
found ways of maintaining the balances between grain cultivation and other
activities. By the thirteenth century the bishopric manor of Withington was Bibury’s
source of wood and timber, and the tenants of Bibury were obliged to carry wood
from there. (35) In the late fourteenth century hurdles, withies, poles and timber were
regularly obtained for use on the demesne from Withington woods, though alternative
sources of supply included Chedworth, and at considerable distance, the bishopric
manor of Ripple in Worcestershire. Even moss for filling the gaps between roofing
slates was brought 7 miles from Withington woods. (36) (Fig. 1)

By the thirteenth century the bishopric paid a very modest rent of 6d to
Beaulieu Abbey for access to a meadow in Inglesham (Wils.) which each year
produced between five and fifteen cartloads of hay, most commonly around ten,
between 1371 and 1394. (37) The tenants’ carts made a journey of about 8 miles and
back to fetch this hay crop. (Fig. 1) The rectory manor of Bibury, held by Osney
Abbey, also rented meadows in Inglesham, from as early as 1280. (38) And when
direct supply of this kind was inadequate, fodder could be bought. In a year when
more sheep than usual wintered at Bibury in 1388-9, three cart loads of hay were
bought at Lechlade, an urban market on the edge of the hay meadows of the Thames
valley. (39)

Bibury had an area of permanent pasture, which may have been at the
northern end of the township, called Ruyndon, which was probably the pasture rated at
80 acres in the survey of c. 1290. (40) (see Fig. 3) The bishops’ officials evidently
thought it too small, as in 1299 the compilers of the survey were careful to record the
restrictions on the use of the pasture by tenants. (41) The meadow could be grazed
after the hay had been taken, but we have seen its limited size. The solution to this
problem for the bishopric officials was careful management of sheep, keeping
numbers down often to no more than 200-300 animals at one time, and by moving
flocks over the estate between Bibury and other manors. In c.1290 and 1299 flocks of
both ewes and wethers were kept on the manor, but in the late fourteenth century in
the winters Bibury’s flock usually consisted of wethers, the hardy adult animals which
could feed on the windswept fallows on the hill above the village. (42) A high
proportion of the grazing available to the livestock of Bibury came from the arable
fields when they were not under crops, and so much depended on the organisation of the field system.

The bishops could also take decisive, even ruthless measures to protect their interest in the pasture. A striking statement was made in the survey of the bishop’s manor in 1299: ‘And know that no-one of the manor, nor any person, has common on the fallows, ‘friscs’, pastures, meadows or elsewhere in the bishop’s demesne, except only the parson of the said church [the canon of Osney] and the said William and John [two free tenants] in the aforesaid pasture of Ruyndone with a fixed number of animals as is aforesaid’. (43) This is in contrast to the frequently encountered arrangement elsewhere by which both the villagers’ and the lord’s animals grazed on the common pasture and on the arable of the whole open fields after the corn harvest was complete. The jury in 1299 recalled that comparatively recently the peasants had common pasture in Ruyndon, for which they had owed a ploughing service, a ‘grassearth’. (44)

The situation on the ground becomes clear when the layout of the fields in the middle ages is reconstructed. (Fig.3) For a long time this was frustrated by the absence of the schedule to give names to the fields marked on the map of 1769. But a map of 1820 which names the fields at the northern end of the township, together with a pre-enclosure glebe terrier of XXXX, and medieval evidence for furlong names reveal the division of land between the demesne and the two open fields. (45) The main road from Bibury to Burford served as the boundary between the demesne and the common fields, which meant that strong roadside hedges allowed the lords to exclude the village animals from the demesne. This explains the anomaly that while many documents refer to the east and west fields of Bibury, the 1299 survey states that the demesne of 446 acres was divided between the east and the north fields. It could have been supposed that the north field had been renamed ‘West Field’ some time after 1299, but the recent research shows that the demesne had its own field system. The separation is confirmed by the cropping of the demesne arable recorded in the accounts of the late fourteenth century, when the furlongs were often named, and such flexibilities are recorded as the cultivation of both winter sown and spring sown crops on the same furlong (Putforlong). While some furlongs were fallowed every other year, others were rested for a longer time. (46) Such freedoms could be practised if there was no need to allow common grazing at times set by the village community. The lord’s land received manure from the demesne livestock, but gained
no benefit from the manure of the peasant flocks moving over the stubbles and fallows. The origin of this arrangement is a matter of speculation. Consolidated blocks of demesne on English manors were not so unusual, and they may date back to a very early date, perhaps to the time when the bishops had to protect their interests as the estate fragmented in the ninth century. The decision to exclude the peasants from the common must have been made in the late thirteenth century when the bishops’ officials felt under pressure to get the maximum returns from the demesne.

The landscape of the demesne in the late thirteenth century can therefore be envisaged as a strip on the eastern side of the township, consisting predominantly of arable, assessed at 446 acres according to one survey, 322 acres by another reckoning, divided equally between two fields, and cropped in alternate years. The land was divided into ridges and furlongs, just as in any other field system. The permanent pasture lay at the northern end, and meadow to the south. In 1290 36.5 acres were called ‘frisc’, which usually means uncultivated arable, and that element must have much increased in the fourteenth century, as the area sown in 1371-94 fluctuated between 60 and 112 acres, which with fallow accounts for between 120 and 224 acres of arable in each year. At least a hundred acres of land therefore was not being used for cultivation, which increased the amount of grazing, but how this was organised is not clear. It was estimated that Bibury could support 500 sheep in c.1290, and 300 in 1299 (but we are not told at what time of year), while in the late fourteenth century 200-300 over wintered and others, often 200 or more, came for some months in the summer. There appears to have been room for more sheep than these, but if we use a calculation of the ratios between animals and sown acres we can see that the managers had shifted the balance between arable and pasture. Reckoning the number of ‘animal units’ for each 100 acres, it can be calculated there were probably about 35 in the 1290s, which is quite near to the national average for ‘sheep-corn’ husbandry at that period, and by 1380-1 the figure had risen to 65, again in line with national trends. The bishops clearly regarded their sheep flocks as an asset, and invested in sheepcotes in a corner of Broad Meadow to provide the wintering flock with shelter and storage space for fodder. When the demesne was leased in the fifteenth century the arable area probably diminished yet further. The bishopric retained some land for sheep pasture, and kept flocks at Bibury until the 1450s. The bishopric officials were concerned that the farmer of the demesne would not keep up cultivation, and in 1451 inserted into the lease a clause requiring...
the farmer to leave 30 acres cultivated and manured. (52) But there is no evidence for a specialised sheep pasture on the demesne.

To sum up the history of Bibury from the lord’s perspective, the enduring impression is of the early and pronounced truncation of the estate, which left the bishops with a residue of land that was both small in size and unbalanced in its assets. They took measures to cope with these problems, and the demesne was able to function for many years, maintaining an adequate pastoral dimension. The poor return from the lord’s cultivation became a serious problem in the late fourteenth century in an age of low prices and high wages. Officials calculated the annual ‘value’ of arable husbandry as 11s 4 1/2d, compared with £11 for wool. And this gloom is confirmed in the late fifteenth century when the Bibury demesne was rented for £4 per annum, which amounts to 2d - 3d per acre. (53) Even in an age of low land values this leasehold rent still comes near to the bottom of any league table.

*   *   *    *    *    *   *

So far we have focussed on the lord’s demesnes and their management, and must turn to the peasant community, which is not so well documented. The peasants appear to have been disadvantaged because they were excluded from the pasture of Ruyndon, and there is no record of a common meadow, pasture or wood, unless they were able to share the Ablington pasture or allowed access to Withington wood. There is no hint that they were experiencing great difficulties in 1299, when the survey shows eight tenants with yardland holdings, each of which contained about 48 acres of arable, and there were also three holdings larger than a yardland, thirteen with half-yardlands (24 acres), one with 32 acres, two with 16, and five cottagers. (54) So 28 of the 32 tenant holdings, an unusually high proportion for the period, had enough land in normal harvest years to feed their families and have a surplus for sale. (55) An explanation for the number of quite large holdings, especially with a yardland and above, and the high acreage of the yardland (which elsewhere averaged 30 acres), must be that the land was judged to be not very productive. The land lay divided between the two fields above the village, in which it would be cultivated in alternate years. The generous allowance for fallowing gave space and time for the sheep to graze, and to deposit the manure which could put some heart into the soil.

Bibury peasants around 1300 may well have adapted their farming to their circumstances, and made an adequate living from the land. Seven free tenants paid
modest sums in rent, but the customary tenants, especially the eighteen tenants of
yardlands and half-yardlands, owed a combination of cash and commuted labour
which came to about 19s per yardland per annum. Probably by 1299, and certainly
soon after that date, the labour services would have been mainly converted into cash
payments. This standard rent of 19s, equivalent to 5d per acre was higher than those
paid by many of their Cotswold contemporaries, which often amounted to about 4d
per acre. The rent was a burden, but on the other hand the lord would have not set
it at that level unless he expected that they could pay. People were not driven away by
their conditions, judging from the persistence of families – of the sixteen surnames in
the Bibury tax list of 1327, at least seven were recorded belonging to tenants 28 years
earlier. Twenty people contributed to the tax in 1327, a high number for a small
place with probably no more than 40 households (allowing for Osney’s tenants as well
as the bishop’s), and their assessments, which averaged just under 2s, again showed
that they owned livestock and taxable goods, and therefore had a capacity to pay. The
sums of money paid in rents and taxes reminds us of the importance of the market for
the peasants. We have seen how the lords practised a degree of self-sufficiency by
securing supplies of hay, wood and timber from their own resources. But the demesne
grain was sold in the thirteenth century, most likely in Cirencester, which was the
largest town in the vicinity, and wool usually went over a longer distance to a
specialist merchant. The peasants would have sold their produce locally, again in
Cirencester but they probably also travelled to the small market towns of Burford,
Lechlade and Northleach. Tithe payments show that they grew a great deal of barley
and dredge, the main brewing grains.

The same optimism cannot be applied to the Bibury peasants after 1349. They suffered a disastrous mortality in the Black Death, and only 7 out of 22 customary tenants remained in the autumn of 1349, implying a death rate above 70 per cent. Numbers recovered in the next 30 years, as 22 households were assessed for the 1381 poll tax (which included tenants of both manors) but the number of people holding land on the bishop’s manor slipped back to about twelve in the rental of 1431, and by 1544 a list of tenants contains twelve names, but only ten at most held land in Bibury itself. The bishop’s manorial records depict a difficult situation resembling that on other manors, but with even more acute problems – rents were drastically reduced, entry fines became merely token payments, yet holdings often lay for a time ‘in the lord’s hands’ because no-one wished to take them.
Holdings were broken up into parcels to make them more rentable. Those who did take Bibury holdings sometimes lived elsewhere – at Northleach for example. There was a rapid turnover in tenants, and almost all of the old families died out or moved away. Buildings fell into decay, and the lord reduced rents to encourage tenants to pay for repairs. The mill was left in ruins, presumably because there were not enough consumers of flour in the village. There is not much information about the fields, but we can be sure that the east and west fields of the village, like the demesne fields to the east, were cultivated in patches, with large area under grass. Grain growing required scarce labour resources, and the price of corn did not reward the effort of producing much more than the needs of the peasants’ households.

The court rolls of the lords of the manor should not always be taken as a fully accurate reflection of village society. We have already noted that there were two manors at Bibury, so the bishop’s court had jurisdiction over only part of the community. Some records survive for both manorial courts, and they both seem brief and uninformative. Why did the Bibury courts not issue numerous bye laws and enforce them? It is hard to believe that this manor could have escaped the often fierce competition between the demands of pastoral and arable farming which troubled so many communities, leading to constant complaints of overburdened commons and other breaches of the regulations concerning livestock. Perhaps the estate officials, who only came to hold the courts once a year, took no great interest in the affairs of this small, remote and unprofitable place, and did not encourage the participation of the tenants in the court that generated so much business elsewhere. The tenants, who were limited in number, may have found ways of settling their disputes over pasture, and maintained order in a village meeting, as divided lordship meant that neither lord’s court commanded much respect.

Some tenants acquired large holdings of two or three yardlands, and were keeping larger numbers of animals, which were causing problems: in 1432 William Jonys was accused of allowing his 80 sheep and two cows to trespass on the lord’s land, and in the following year Thomas Benet, perhaps with the same end in mind, was said to have broken into the lord’s close. So perhaps some of the tenants were putting the uncultivated land in the open fields to good use, as Osney Abbey seems to have done – by virtue of its rights as holder of the glebe it was pasturing 238 wethers at Bibury, mainly on the village fields, in 1477.
The village plan suggests an alternative perspective on Bibury’s development. (see Fig. 4) The earliest representation is the map of 1769, which records streets and plot boundaries established at a much earlier period. Although people had been living on the banks of the Coln for many centuries before the foundation of the Roman villa (its site lay to the east of the medieval mill), we should not suppose that the lords’ residence or the minster church of the eighth and ninth centuries were surrounded by closely packed peasant houses, as the nucleated village of Bibury, like many others, may have formed a century or two later. The settlement fell into four parts. To the east lay the centres of religion and lordship, with the parish church, Bibury Court (probably on the site of the bishop’s manor house), the Osney Abbey manor and the mill. Immediately to the west stood a cluster of houses, which presumably were the successors of many of the medieval tenants’ messuages. One expects that the holdings which were most dependent on the manor, those of the cottagers and enchlonds (the tenants of which performed specialist services on the demesne) had been established here. They are not recorded until 1299, but may well go back to the twelfth century or earlier. The third element was the single row of houses facing the village street and the river, known as Bywell, which resembles the planned villages (likely to be at least as old as the twelfth century) so characteristic of the region.(66) The fourth element is the most unusual, as on the northern edge of the main village cluster lies the Square, a small open space on which no less than seven roads and lanes converge. It resembles a market place, and even has at its southern end buildings jutting into the space, as if the result of infilling when temporary stalls were converted into permanent structures. It is of course possible that this piece of village planning belongs to some modern phase of improvement, such as might have occurred in the seventeenth century when Bibury Court was being rebuilt, but one is reminded that much earlier markets were often connected with estate centres, hundred meeting sites, and minster churches.(67) If a market was held in this space, it was not sanctioned by royal authority, as no market charter is known, but perhaps its origins lay in some pre-Conquest institution, and the bishop or Osney Abbey later organised the layout of streets and buildings around it.

The market place theory is supported by some hints of commercial activity at Bibury in the later middle ages. In 1327 one of the contributors to the lay subsidy, Robert le Chapman, carried an occupational name, meaning trader or merchant.(68) In the views of frankpledge (courts leet) which enforced the assize of ale (a price
regulating measure), Bibury is recorded in the late fourteenth century with an unusual number of ale sellers for a village of twenty households, with nine brewers in 1383, eight in 1384 and 1388, and seven in 1389. In the fifteenth century, as happened elsewhere, the number of brewers breaking the assize fell to between one and five each year. In 1439 and 1441 the significantly named William Bochour was fined for selling meat excessively. (69) The poll tax of 1381 reveals a remarkable variety of non-agricultural occupations for such a small place. A total of 52 people paid tax (including a group caught in a second enquiry after widespread evasion had been discovered) and they belonged to about 22 households.(70) Eight of the households were headed by men described as cultures, which could be translated as cultivators, husbandmen or peasants. Most of these appear in contemporary manorial records holding a yardland. Four labourers and two shepherds presumably held cottages or other smallholdings. No less than eight of the households were headed by artisans or traders, namely three carpenters, a smith, a tailor, a brewer, a butcher, and a mysterious ‘merchant’ called Nailor (his first name is not legible) who paid 2s 4d for himself and his wife instead of the standard 2s, and who makes no appearance in the contemporary manorial documents. A number of these people had dual occupations, in that they held land and practised a craft or trade, but nonetheless the choice of the tax assessors to identify such a group of people by their non-agricultural occupations suggests that Bibury had a special character, and one for which there is little hint in the manorial court records.

The court records also give little indication of the transformation in Bibury’s social structure between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1299 and 1327 one gains an impression of a society of equals, with about twenty households making an adequate though modest living from their yardlands and half yardlands. The court rolls and rental of the fifteenth century show the accumulation of holdings in the hands of a few tenants, though one is given no strong indication that they were prospering on the basis of their cheap land. Wealth was distributed among the seventeen taxpayers in 1525 with a high degree of inequality.(71) The richest villager with goods worth £100, as is so often the case at this time, was the farmer, but not of the bishop’s demesne: Richard Bagot leased the assets of the Osney Abbey rectory. The seven men taxed on wages, an unusually high proportion, who paid the minimum of 4d, probably included his employees. Smallholders and wage earners were represented by three tax payers with good assessed at £2, but the remainder were
taxed on goods worth £3, £4, two with £7, £11 and £18. We do not know what proportion of their modest substance came from their management of corn and sheep on the much altered common fields, and how much from some commercial enterprise based on the Square, but they show that Bibury was not totally depressed.

* * * * * * *

This enquiry has applied a broad brush over the development of a section of the countryside over more than a thousand years, using landscape as evidence as well as documents. In many ways Bibury’s past has followed a conventional route, but its special features – the drastic degradation of the great early medieval Coln estate, the problems of balancing the farming system faced by lords and peasants alike, peasant adjustment to new circumstances after 1349 – all throw light on wider changes in society.

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Notes

9. Gloucestershire County Council, Sites and Monuments Record (hereafter SMR)
17. A. Farley, ed., *Domesday Book*, 1783 (hereafter *DB*), fos. 164a, 164d, 165c, 169d, 170c; CS 487; Finberg, 48. The inclusion of Poulton and Eysey would bring the total hidage near to 50, a round number.
19. CS 304, Finberg, 44; CS 580, Finberg, 51; CS 1091, Finberg, 55.
22. CS 487; CS 580.
24. DB, 164d; 24 tenants and 11 slaves is more than would be expected of a manor with c.30 tenants in 1299, and 33 ploughs suggest more arable acres than Bibury township contained. The 2 mills presumably were situated in Bibury and Ablington. Tenants at Ablington with obligations to Bibury manor are recorded in Worcestershire Record Office (hereafter WRO), ref.009:1, BA 2636/160 92050, and Gloucestershire Record Office (hereafter GRO), D687, 1-24, 63,64.
30. *VCH Glos*, VII, 9, 34
32. *RBW*, part 4, 368; WRO, ref.009:1 BA 2636/160 92050.
35. *RBW*, part 4, 371
36. WRO, 009:1 BA 2636/159 92049 2/7; 92049 4/7, 92049 5/7, 92049 6/7, 92049 7/7; 1/160 92050-92062.
37. *RBW*, part 4, 368; WRO, 009:1, BA 2636, parcel and document numbers as in note 36
39. WRO, 009:1 BA 2636/160 92060.
40. *VCH Glos*, VII, 34; *RBW*, part 4, 376.
41. *RBW*, part 4, 368
42. *RBW*, part 4, 368, 376; WRO, ref.009:1 BA 2636 as in note 36.
43. *RBW*, part 4, 368.
44. *RBW*, part 4, 371
45. GRO, P440/SD1/1; D 678/4390/180; P44 MI/1. The problem of the layout of demesnes as blocks or scattered strips is discussed in D. Hall, *The Open Fields of Northamptonshire*, Northamptonshire Record Society, 38, 1995, 66-75.
48. WRO, ref. 009:1 BA 2636 as in note 36.
51. *L & P*, 150-1
54. *RBW*, part 4, 369-75.
56. Dyer, ‘Villages and Non-Villages’, 29. Bibury rents were near to 5d. per acre. In other nearby villages they were often 4d. per acre or below.
58. Bodleian Library, MS. D D Ch Ch O R 132. The Osney Abbey barn at Bibury in the early fourteenth century contained 80 quarters of wheat, 220 of barley, 200 of dredge (barley and oats mixed) and 20 of oats. The grain was mainly from tithes, and therefore reflected peasant crops.
60. *L & P*, 240; WRO, ref 009:1 BA 2636/18 43765, fo. 45r.
61. GRO, D 678, as in note 24; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. DD Ch Ch O.R. 127, 130

64. GRO, D678, 64.


68. Franklin, 51.

69. GRO, D 678, as in note 24.


71. TNA:PRO, E179/ 113/213.

Captions for Figures.

Fig. 1. South-east Gloucestershire, showing the location of Bibury and various places with which it was connected.

Fig. 2 The estate of Coln, at its maximum extent c. 700, with later parish boundaries.

Fig. 3 The township of Bibury, with roads, fields, demesne, as they existed c. 1299.

Fig. 4 A simplified plan of the village of Bibury, as depicted on the map of 1769.

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Gloucestershire’s elegant little town is noted for its super-smart high street, where an unbroken streak of tall terraced houses impose on the road beneath. Well-preserved yet full of history, the town is one of the north Cotswolds’ finest towns and often less busy than more well-known places in the region such as Burford and Bourton-on-the-Water too. Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire, England. Upper and Lower Slaughter, Gloucestershire, England. Roserunn/Shutterstock. These enchanting sister villages are a mile apart and linked by the tiny River Eye. The famous writer and designer William Morris once declared Bibury in the Cotswolds the most beautiful village in the country. A hundred or so years later the sentiment certainly seems to stand. Historian David Ross looks at Bibury, Gloucestershire, a picture postcard Cotswold village famous for its row of medieval almshouses. Bibury is a timeless place; the sort of place that visitors to England imagine all English villages to be like. History. The origins of Bibury are unclear, but we know that in the early 8th century estates here were given by Bishop Wilfrith of Worcester to Earl Leppas and his daughter Beaga (Ad 721-743). The settlement was known as Beagan-byrig, or Beaga’s enclosure. Over time the named evolved to become Bibury. Arlington Row. Arlington Row. This row of picturesque Grade I listed stone cottages form perhaps THE classic Cotswold view and have appeared on countless calendar covers and postc See more ideas about gloucestershire, cotswolds, english counties. We are in the middle of re-landscaping our garden, Hidcote was a great place to get some ideas and inspiration. The entrance I liked this little area leading towards the restaurant. As soon as we got there, we headed for the restaurant. Click through to read my travel tips for Bibury, Gloucestershire including where to find gluten free food in the village, when to visit and where to stay! #bibury #cotswolds #england #travel #traveltips #beautifuldestinations. England Countryside. British Countryside. Gloucestershire’s Countryside. On a clear day, one of the finest views across the spa town of Cheltenham and out toward the Malvern Hills beyond can be enjoyed from the top of Leckhampton Hill. Originating in the 7th century as a church for the abbey dedicated to Saint Peter, Gloucester Cathedral has a Norman core with a 15th-century tower rising 225ft and topped by four delicate pinnacles—a local landmark visible for miles. The cathedral cloisters were used for corridor scenes in several Harry Potter films, whilst the crypt featured in Sherlock’s Christmas special. Gloucester Cathedral exterior. Credit barnyz, flickr. At over 1000 years old, Gloucester Cathedral is the oldest building in the world to have a solar array installed to reduce energy costs.