LIVED EXPERIENCE IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES:
STUDIES OF BODIAM AND OTHER ELITE LANDSCAPES
IN SOUTH-EASTERN ENGLAND

Edited by Matthew Johnson
Abstract

This edited volume sets out the work of a team of scholars from Northwestern University and the University of Southampton led by Matthew Johnson, in collaboration with the National Trust. Between 2010 and 2014, different members of the group carried out topographical, geophysical and building survey at four different late medieval sites and landscapes in south-eastern England, all owned and managed by the National Trust: Bodiam, Scotney, Knole and Ightham. Studies were also undertaken into documentary, map and other evidence. A particularly important element of the research was to synthesise and re-present the ‘grey literature’ at all four sites.

This volume seeks to present this work and discuss its archaeological and historical importance. It places the four sites and their landscapes in their setting, as part of the wider landscape of south-east England. It discusses the importance of these places in understanding later medieval elite sites and landscapes in general, and in terms of their long-term biographies and contexts. Central to the volume are the linked ideas of lived experience and political economy and ecology in presenting a new understanding of late medieval sites and landscapes.
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Foreword
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The National Trust is honoured to be the custodian of some of the United Kingdom’s most magnificent and significant houses and landscapes ‘for ever, for everyone’. This is both a privilege and a daunting task requiring copious amounts of skill, knowledge, foresight and resources. It is a mission undertaken not only by the Trust’s staff but one shared between a multitude of volunteers and partnerships dedicated to the understanding and conservation of our past. Academics and their students rate highly in this partnership: their studies of Trust properties in pursuit of their own research agendas simultaneously provide vital management knowledge for the Trust as well as a wealth of new stories to tell visitors.

Professor Johnson and the team of experts he brought together, from Northwestern University in the USA and the University of Southampton in the UK, is an excellent example of how well the Trust and academia work together. This work builds on the knowledge of generations of historians and archaeologists who have cared for and studied the properties. This model of collaborative working has resulted in a new depth of understanding of how these properties functioned.

Though the Trust has cared for Bodiam, Ightham, Knole and Scotney for many years it would not claim to fully understand how they functioned in their pomp. These are long-lived, multi-layered structures, that sit within a complicated and mostly vanished set of physical and social networks and ways of life. We can wonder at the physical intricacy of the building remains, but without the context of how they functioned within the rituals and politics of their day they remain curiosities. The work of Professor Johnson and his team, beautifully portrayed in this volume, brings these properties to life and illustrates how remarkable they were. This will allow the Trust to care for them in an even more sympathetic manner and, just as importantly, tell their authentic stories to the thousands of people who visit each year.

By attempting to explain how these great houses worked at a physical and social scale, Professor Johnson is continuing with the tradition in archaeology to move away from the study of sites as isolated places to the understanding of landscapes, societies, networks and connections. The Trust itself is doing the same with its landscapes; researching the human and natural connections that formed them, and that need to be understood in order to manage them in the future. The modern world is a complex place, but it is naive to think it was not always so. The relationship between people and the landscapes and buildings they construct is fundamental to who we are as a society and a nation, and to how we move forward.

As previously written, the Trust, wherever possible, is keen to share the responsibility to research and understand its properties as it cannot itself cover the vast range of expertise required to understand such complex entities. Professor Johnson’s project has been a shining example of how this can work. The fieldwork facilitated by Trust staff has given many undergraduates the opportunity to work and learn on significant and spectacular sites, and has seen two students progress through to their Doctorates. This volume is a tribute to all of their efforts for which the Trust is extremely grateful.

Bodiam, Ightham, Knole and Scotney are four important properties of which we now have a much greater understanding, but the Trust never stands still. Undoubtedly this work is a landmark moment, but with many more properties still to research and techniques continually evolving, for the Trust, the work goes on.