

Maurice Warwick Beresford (1920-2005)

Maurice Beresford, economic and social historian, was born in Sutton Coldfield, Warwickshire, on 6th February 1920, the only child of Harry and Nora Beresford. Harry Beresford worked in a chemist company until his early death, at the age of 46, in 1934. Beresford continued to live with his widowed mother in the Sutton Coldfield area and later in Leeds until her death in 1966.

Beresford was educated at Bishop Vesey's Grammar School (1930-38), where he was strongly influenced by William Roberts, a "stimulating history master", and William Sutton, "a terrifying and rigorous geography master who made map reading as natural and interesting as reading a novel or a play". Beresford was hopeless at sports but developed a keen interest in exploring the countryside around his home. He was also one of the school's star pupils and succeeded in getting a scholarship to Jesus College Cambridge.

Although socially uncomfortable at Cambridge, Beresford thrived academically. In his second year, he attended seminars, along with Asa Briggs, by historian John Saltmarsh (King's College), who had collaborated with the historical geographer HC Darby in the study of early field arrangements of one of the college's Norfolk properties. In the Christmas vacation of 1939-40, Saltmarsh set his students an essay based on an aspect of the history of a home locality which illustrated some general theme in economic history. Already fascinated by maps, Beresford discovered that the "Coldfield" of his home town had a similar field system to the one already described by Darby and Saltmarsh. Saltmarsh encouraged Beresford to send an article on the topic to the *Economic Journal*, then edited by John Maynard Keynes.

In September 1939, Beresford registered as a Conscientious Objector. Partly as a consequence, in the following summer vacation, he did social work in the East End of London, an experience which made a lasting impression. Social work was to remain a major interest for the rest of his life. After being awarded a First in History (along with Asa Briggs) in 1941, Beresford again did social work in the East End and then in the Birmingham Settlement.

In 1942, Beresford became Sub-Warden (and later Warden) of the Percival Guildhouse, an adult education centre in Rugby. In his spare time, he dug out pre-enclosure maps of Warwickshire and explored the nearby countryside. Using recently released aerial photographs, he proposed that the extensive ridge and furrows were the abandoned selions of late medieval fields. This was an important contribution to the emerging discipline of agricultural history, but Beresford had already started to develop an interest in the history of settlement. While tracing the medieval selions of Bittesby on Leicestershire, he noticed but did not appreciate the significance of a parish lacking a church and village, but with an area of grassy mounds and hollows. This was pointed out to Beresford by WG Hoskins, a lecturer at University College Leicester, who had embarked on a survey of deserted villages in Leicestershire, having initially also failed to recognise the significance of similar earthworks in his work. As Hoskins was well-advanced in Leicestershire, Beresford decided to focus elsewhere. After being appointed to a lectureship in economic history at Leeds University in 1948, he turned his attention to Yorkshire.

Beresford's work on deserted villages culminated in the publication of his first major work, *The Lost Villages of England*, in 1954. It remains a seminal work on the subject, as does the joint publication by Beresford and Hoskins of *The Making of the English Landscape* in 1955. Beresford next book, *History on the Ground* was published in 1957 and played a significant role in influencing the emerging study of landscape history. All these books reflect Beresford's research methodology: find good early maps and documents for a place; visit, take notes and photographs; seek evidence by further research and, if possible, aerial photography; and apply the local evidence unearthed to general themes in economic and social history.

The use of aerial photographs led to Beresford's co-operation with geologist JK St Joseph, who built up an impressive archive at Cambridge of low-level oblique aerial photographs of archaeological sites during the 1950s. In 1958, they published the unexpectedly successful *Medieval England: An Aerial Survey*.

The work of Beresford and Hoskins was encouraged by MM Postan at Cambridge, who was developing theories on the demographic history of the Middle Ages and, in particular, population decline. Evidence of so many deserted villages reinforced the documentary evidence. Postan's interest encouraged Beresford and Hoskins to undertake some archaeology, initially without success. However, in a lecture in 1949 on the BBC about the Black Death, Beresford mentioned Wharram Percy in the East Riding of Yorkshire, where he had been amazed to find an isolated church and massive surviving earthworks. This prompted Mr Winstanley, headmaster of a school near Wharram Percy, to offer his good offices to get permission to dig the site. In 1950, Beresford started digging. In 1952, he was joined by archaeologist, John Hurst, who organised the digging on a professional basis. The summer dig became an annual event, involving hundreds of volunteers from all backgrounds, including prisoners from local institutions whom Beresford (a prison visitor) had persuaded to co-operate. The story is told by Beresford and Hurst in their joint publication in 1990, *Wharram Percy: Deserted Medieval Village*.

An offshoot of Hurst and Beresford's work was the foundation in 1952 of the Deserted Medieval Research Group, which eventually became the Medieval Settlement Research Group.

By the mid-1950's, Beresford's interest had started to move away from rural settlement towards urban history and, in particular, the origins and morphology of medieval towns. He started to travel across England, Wales and Gascony to examine sites that would form the basis of his greatest work, *New Towns of the Middle Ages*, published in 1967. As in his work on deserted villages, Beresford's achievement was to show that what had hitherto been seen as isolated examples were, in fact, representative of much wider phenomena linked to powerful demographic, social and economic forces. He concentrated his research on towns founded between 1000 and the Black Death in places where little or nothing has existed before. Through numerous case studies, Beresford was able to demonstrate the speculative nature of town development in a era of boom, when population was expanding and the market economy developing apace.

A spin-off from *New Towns of the Middle Ages* was Beresford co-operation with HPR Finsberg on the first gazetteer, county by county, of medieval English boroughs, published in 1973 as *English Medieval Boroughs: a Hand-List*.

At the same time, Beresford focussed closer to home and began researching the historical geography of Leeds, particularly the areas being redeveloped by the University. This led to his co-operation with GRJ Jones, a senior lecturer in Geography at Leeds, who later became the first holder in Britain of a chair in Historical Geography.

Beresford retired from Leeds University in 1988 as the holder of the Chair of Economic History, just as the Wharram Percy project was drawing to a close. The same year, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. In 2004, he became Emeritus Professor at Leeds, one of many honorary awards. He continued to work and publish on Leeds, hold part-time academic posts, and serve on various social, civic and academic committees, despite his deteriorating health. After a bout of serious illness, he died in hospital on 15 December 2005.