

old ridge-and-furrow landscape of the open fields. For example, in 1354-5 a flock of nearly 800 sheep was kept on the demesne at Great Chesterton.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the same century some 400 sheep were folded on the lord's demesne at Radbourn<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2), while a bailiff's account roll for Kingston shows that over half the manorial receipts in 1393-4 were derived from the pasturing of tenant beasts.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that by the late 1430's many lords of the manor had recognized the advantages to be gained by converting all their arable land to great sheep walks. This was especially easy in villages where there were few or no freemen and ruthless lords could drive the peasants from the land and even destroy the village itself. One or two herdsmen could then tend the stock, their wages were only a small item, and the profits to be gained from commercial stock-raising were considerable. In consequence by 1460 rural depopulation had become a serious national problem affecting many counties besides Warwickshire. The severity of depopulation in Warwickshire alone may be judged by the fact that at least 100 settlements were to be affected, although many of these did not disappear entirely.

Professor M. W. Beresford has already provided most interesting and fully documented accounts of the medieval depopulations for England in general, and for Warwickshire in particular, and it is unnecessary to enlarge on these here.<sup>4</sup> Instead the writer proposes to make one or two observations on the reasons<sup>5</sup> generally advanced for the depopulations before discussing in detail the fate of Wormleighton itself. In the first place, one would emphasize that too much weight has probably been attached to wool alone by those seeking to explain the reasons for the widespread conversion of open arable to enclosed pasture during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. While it is not denied that wool commanded a very high price both at home and abroad, one would stress, too, that growing towns of the period, such as Birmingham and Coventry, required meat as well as bread. Nor was mutton the only flesh, for large herds of cattle were kept in many parts of Warwickshire, providing not only beef, butter, and cheese for the townsfolk, but also hides for the flourishing leather industry in local centres like Birmingham, Coventry, and Lichfield. In the second place, one would emphasize that the maintenance of good arable farming on the heavy Lower Lias Clay of many parts of south Warwickshire depended as much on weather conditions as on general soil fertility and favourable social and economic conditions. That these sticky soils, so prone to water-logging, can yield good crops of corn in favourable years was seen during the ploughing-up campaign of the Second World War, but once the emergency was over many farmers lost no time in allowing this intractable land to tumble down to grass again as feed for cattle and sheep. Indeed, during wet years there can be little doubt that the best crop for much of this land is grass.

<sup>1</sup> Willoughby de Broke MS. 393b (bailiff's account roll of Great Chesterton 1354-5) at Shakespeare's Birthplace Library, Stratford-on-Avon.

<sup>2</sup> Public Record Office, *Ministers' Accounts* 1041/10 and 13. Even earlier, pasture for 600 sheep had been included in a grant of land in Radbourn to the monks of Combe. See W. Dugdale, 2nd edn., p. 329.

<sup>3</sup> Willoughby de Broke MSS. 438 and 439.

<sup>4</sup> M. W. Beresford, 'The Deserted Villages of Warwickshire', *Transactions Birmingham Archaeological Society*, lxvi (1945-6), 49-106; also *The Lost Villages of England* (London, 1954).

<sup>5</sup> See H. Thorpe, 'The Lost Villages of Warwickshire', *Warwickshire and Worcestershire Magazine*, Feb. 1959.