

Of ruins and revenants

Across Britain, hundreds of once-thriving medieval settlements were abandoned for reasons ranging from disease to economic collapse. **CONNIE ROUT** visits one of the country's most atmospheric 'lost villages'

Wharram Percy is one of the best-preserved of Britain's deserted settlements – yet, even after decades of academic study, it still feels like a hidden secret. First you must descend an ancient track deep within the Yorkshire Wolds; only then can you find the medieval road leading to the heart of this long-abandoned village. Today, a tumbledown church dating from the 12th century is the last standing structure of medieval origin. Cows graze where peasant longhouses once stood, and the waters of a shimmering millpond are ruffled only by damselflies and birds.

At the turn of the 14th century, though, Wharram Percy was home to around 200 residents. Follow a path between its earth-work remains and you can imagine how it might once have looked at its peak, under the governance of the influential Percy family. Interpretative boards dotted around the site show how its layout and buildings changed over the centuries.

It's not just an atmospheric spot for a ramble. Wharram Percy's legacy is the rich picture of medieval village life that it has provided thanks to the Wharram Research Project, launched in 1948. Over the following decades, annual excavations uncovered extensive material culture and more than 600 human skeletons. Through the project, which ran until 2012, these extraordinary finds have shaped our understanding of the lives of English peasants in the Middle Ages.

In the 1960s, archaeologists discovered a pit of skeletal remains that spoke of a darker past. Some 137 bones were unearthed, belonging to at least 10 individuals who lived

between the 11th and 14th centuries. These bones display evidence of decapitation, dismemberment and burning, likely inflicted shortly after death.

A prominent theory suggests that these demonstrate a belief in revenants – the living dead. Accounts from across medieval Europe speak of discontented souls rising from their graves, spreading disease and plaguing the living. According to these texts, communities could rid themselves of an irksome revenant by digging up the corpse and destroying it. Are the mutilated Wharram Percy skeletons suggestive of villagers attempting to rid themselves of the 'living dead'? If so, it would make this the only site in the UK where such evidence of the practice has been found.

Unruly corpses weren't, though, responsible for the ultimate demise of the settlement, which was abandoned by the early 17th century. Its fortunes had suffered over the course of the 14th century, hit first by raiding Scots and then by the Black Death, but the final nail in the coffin came with the rise of sheep farming.

Wharram Percy's peasantry had long cultivated arable land around the village. However, as the demand for (and price of) English wool grew, landowners replaced crops with sheep. Villagers were moved out in numbers from the late 1450s; then, around 1500, four families were evicted from the settlement and their houses destroyed, leaving only shepherds and smallholders.

To get a real feel for the landscape around Wharram Percy, visit the site as part of a circular walk through the Yorkshire Wolds – noting that much of the countryside in the area has now been converted back to arable farmland. Perhaps stop for lunch in the historic market town of Malton and, if you can't get enough of medieval ruins, call in at nearby Kirkham Priory. All contribute to a sense of the history of this beautiful area. **H**

Connie Rout is a Yorkshire-based writer specialising in heritage, travel and tourism

For more information, head to english-heritage.org.uk



The remains of St Martin's Church, built from the 12th century, comprise the only medieval structure still standing at Wharram Percy



Excavations at St Martin's revealed that it was built on the site of two earlier churches from the 10th and 11th centuries



ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES



An artist's impression of Wharram Percy in the 13th century depicts rows of 'tofts' (plots for peasant houses), each with an adjacent 'croft' (strip of land) used for growing food

The footprint of the 18th-century vicarage – Wharram Percy's fourth – can be seen in front of St Martin's church

// Some 137 bones unearthed here display evidence of decapitation, dismemberment and burning, likely inflicted after death //