



Hovels Survey Summary

AN OVERVIEW OF MARKET GARDEN HOVELS
IN THE VALE OF EVESHAM

MARKET GARDENING HERITAGE PROJECT
2021

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Introduction

From 2018 to 2021, a project supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund allowed the market gardening industry that thrived in the Vale of Evesham to be recorded, shared and celebrated. The key focus of the Market Gardening Heritage project was local memories and buildings, as both were at risk of being lost without record. This summary focuses on the record of historic buildings that has been created. The project was run by Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service, in partnership with Cleeve Prior Heritage Trust and Parish Council, Vale Landscape Heritage Trust and the Worcestershire Farmsteads Project.

Vale of Evesham 'hovels'

At one time, most of the population around Evesham and Pershore were employed in market gardening or a related industry. A wide variety of vegetables, fruit, herbs and cut flowers grown by independent growers were sold at markets up and down the country from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. As all gardeners know, a shed is essential for storing equipment, produce and providing shelter. Market gardening was no exception: rows of timber, corrugated iron and occasionally brick built structures once lined the ends of their grounds. Generally built to market gardeners' own design and requirements, each was unique in both design and function. Some doubled up as temporary accommodation for hired hands, some were used for keeping racing pigeons or brewing homemade alcohol and one even served as a monthly barber's shop!

Locally known as 'hovels' (or 'ovels'), these distinctive small buildings once dotted the landscape and were significant social hubs, as well as practical buildings. Hovels are a distinctive and unique aspect of market gardening in the Vale of Evesham, as they do not appear to have been built in other market gardening regions. Since the rise of commercial horticulture and gradual decline of market gardening during the latter half of the 20th century, these small buildings have been slowly disappearing through abandonment and change of land use. For a detailed history of market gardening, see the project's online exhibition [*Grown in the Vale*](#).

Survey methods

Extent of survey

A survey to record surviving hovels was undertaken by a team of 22 local volunteers. The first phase of the survey covered 11 core parishes. Due to available time and the dedication of volunteers, a second phase of the survey also took place, which covered a further 13 parishes. The core area was Evesham and ten surrounding parishes, from Wickhamford in the south to Harvington and Cleeve Prior in the north. The additional parishes were to the west of Evesham, as far as and including Pershore, plus two parishes to the south of Evesham and one to the east. Whilst the Vale of Evesham is not a fixed area, the survey covered virtually all of the parishes most often considered to form the Vale.

Phase 1

For the 11 parishes in the first phase, each was covered by a search of historic maps and aerial photographs. This was undertaken in autumn 2018 by staff at Worcestershire's Historic Environment Record. The possible hovel sites identified by maps and aerial photographs were classified as surviving, of unknown survival and gone.

Following training by Worcestershire Farmsteads Project, each volunteer team was assigned a parish and visited all 'unknown' sites to check their survival, as well as walking across the parish's footpaths to pick up any additional, previously missed hovels. Surviving hovels were recorded via photographs and a building record sheet (created by the project) that contained a written description and measured sketch of the building. Where it was not possible to access hovels on private land but the building was visible from a public right of way, a partial record was taken from the footpath or road. A small number of sites were inaccessible and remain unrecorded.

Phase 2

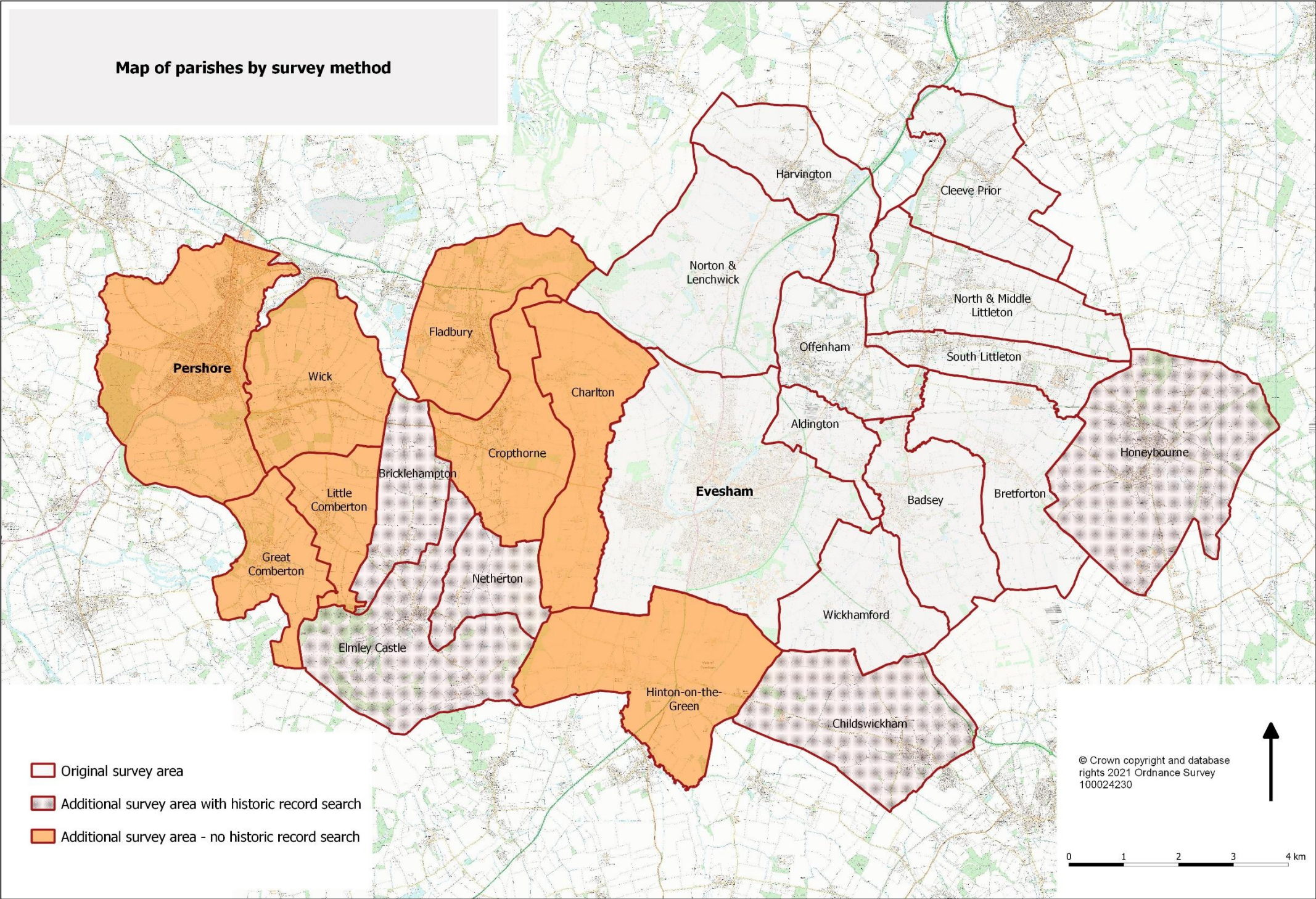
For the 13 parishes in the second phase of the project, recording methods changed to a more rapid walkover assessment. As these parishes were not covered by the 2018 search of historic maps and aerial photographs, no potential hovel sites had previously been identified. Instead, a volunteer team walked along the parish's public rights of way and recorded any visible hovels in as much detail as possible from the footpath or road. A full record with measurements was often not possible, but a partial record was considered to be better than none. Due to the walkover nature of the survey, it is possible that a few hovels on private land were missed. Absent hovels are also unrecorded for many of these parishes, although a list of historically detectable hovels has been compiled by a volunteer for five parishes (drawing on early edition Ordnance Surveys and 1949 aerial photographs).




Assessment of condition

Alongside a written and photographic record, the condition of hovels was assessed. Buildings were grouped into four categories, described below. This data was collected in order to understand how rapidly these buildings may disappear and provide a baseline to measure future condition against.


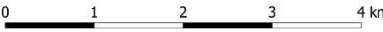
Extant	Building walls and roof intact: does not have to be used for original purpose
Ruined	Substantial remains of building visible above ground, but walls and roof not intact
Demolished	Site of building visible, but only low walls or floor surviving
Absent	No evidence of building above ground

Map of parishes by survey method



-  Original survey area
-  Additional survey area with historic record search
-  Additional survey area - no historic record search

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Survey results

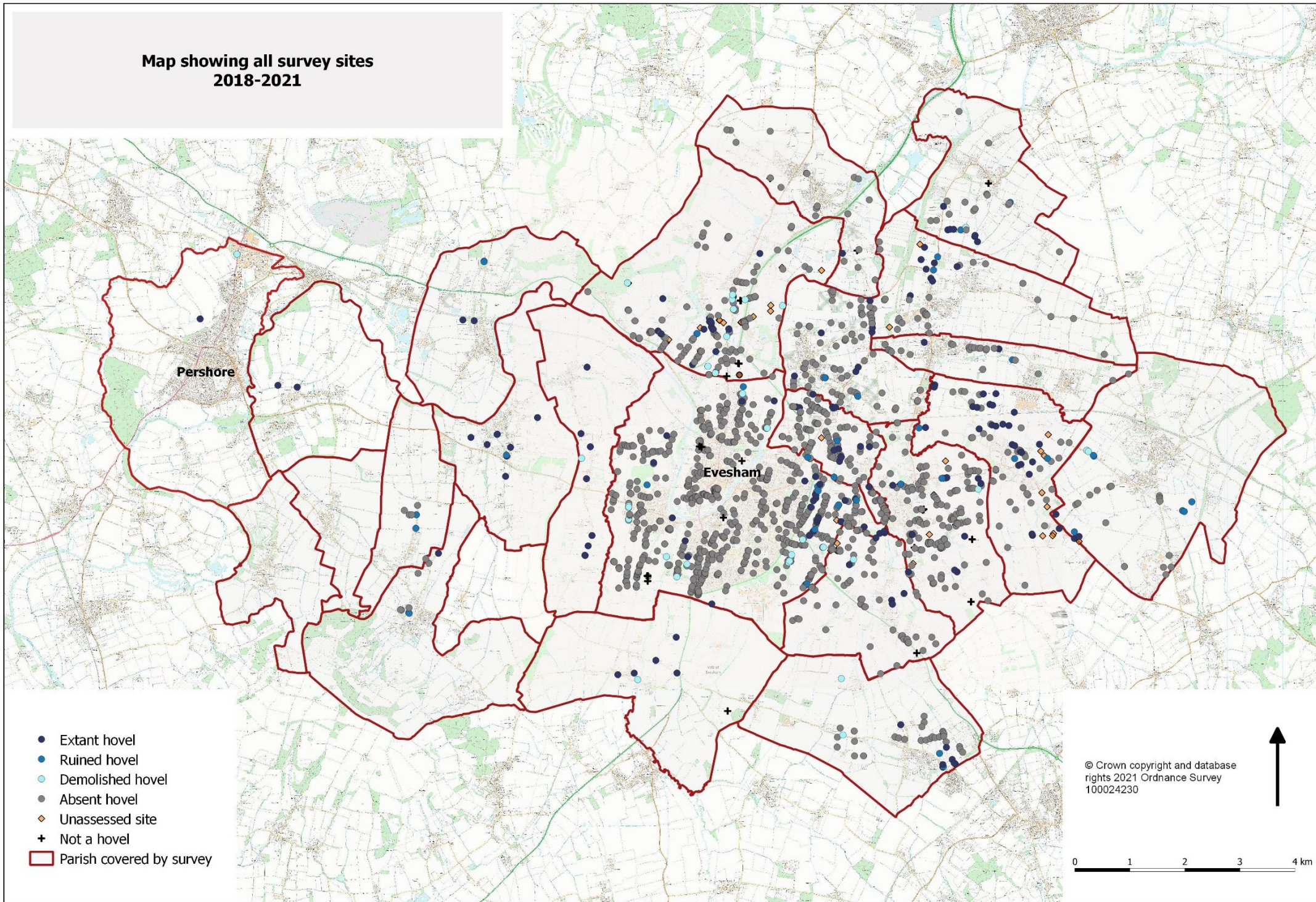
The distribution of hovels across the Vale of Evesham, together with their survival and condition, is shown on the maps below. Details of the numbers of hovels identified by the survey, broken into parishes and their state of preservation, are given in the following table:

Parish	Surviving Hovels			Unassessed	Absent	Total
	Extant	Ruined	Demolished			
Aldington	15	2	0	1	102	120
Badsey	11	2	1	6	143	163
Bretforton	29	3	0	9	43	84
Bricklehampton	0	2	0	0	4	6
Charlton*	8	0	1	0	0	9
Childswickham	7	3	2	0	27	39
Cleeve Prior	7	2	1	0	15	25
Cropthorne*	8	1	0	0	0	9
Elmley Castle	1	2	0	0	6	9
Evesham	27	10	18	1	614	670
Fladbury*	2	2	0	0	0	4
Great Comberton*	0	0	0	0	0	0
Harvington	1	0	0	0	19	20
Hinton on the Green*	5	0	1	0	0	6
Honeybourne	2	6	2	0	16	26
Little Comberton*	0	0	0	0	0	0
Netherton	0	0	0	0	0	0
North & Middle Littleton	10	2	0	2	27	41
Norton & Lenchwick	18	1	10	15	109	153
Offenham	5	2	0	0	72	79
Pershore*	1	0	1	0	0	2
South Littleton	2	1	0	0	24	27
Wick*	2	0	0	0	0	2
Wickhamford	10	0	1	7	63	81
Total for all parishes	171	41	38	41	1284	1575
Percentage of total	10.9%	2.6%	2.4%	2.6%	81.5%	100%

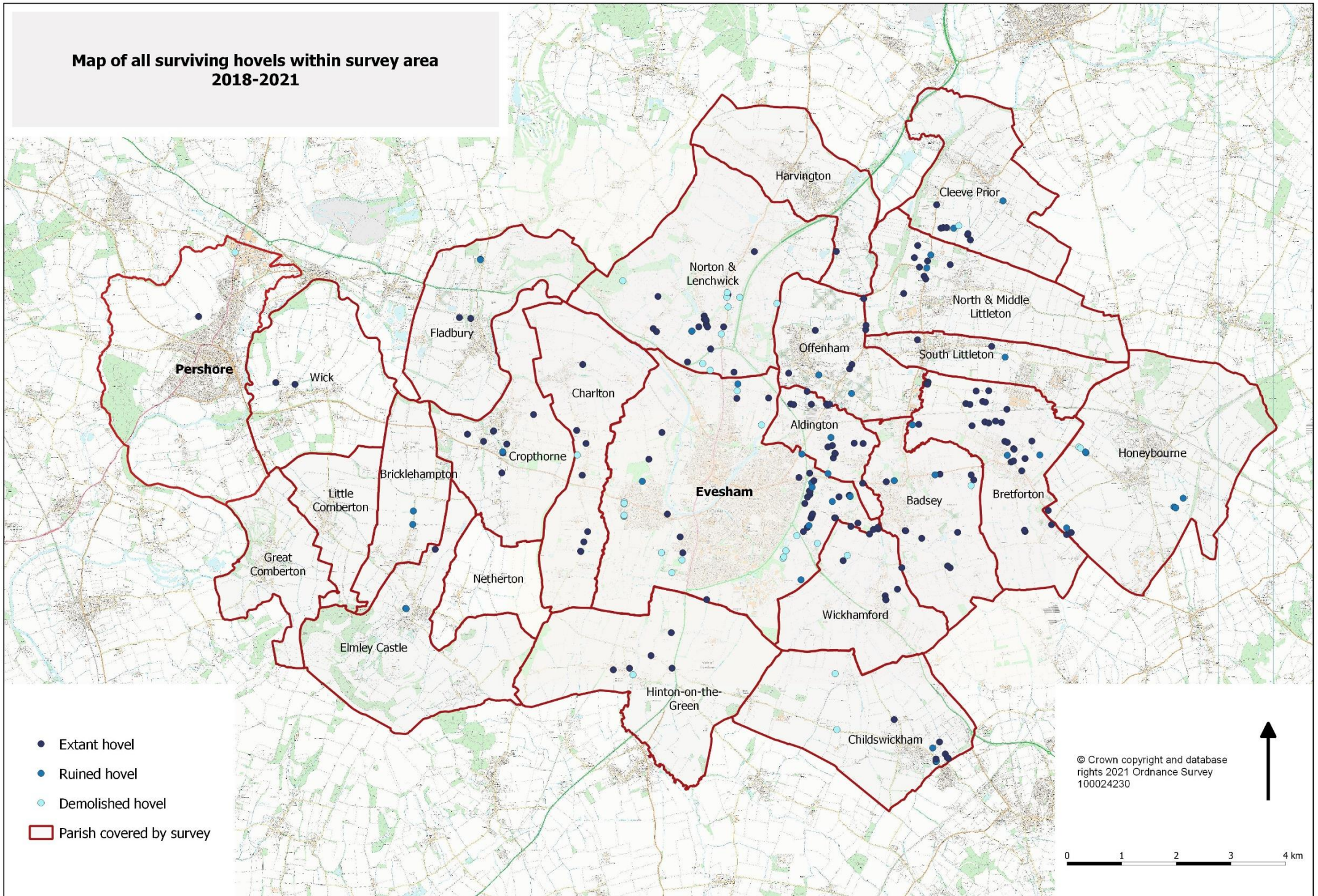
Parishes in the additional survey area (phase 2 of the survey) are highlighted in yellow.

**No historic map or aerial photograph search to identify historic (absent) hovels was undertaken in these parishes.*

**Map showing all survey sites
2018-2021**



**Map of all surviving hovels within survey area
2018-2021**



Number of hovels

The number of hovels built across the Vale of Evesham is greater than anticipated prior to the survey. Whilst the survey has not established the date of their construction (and in most cases this would be impossible to pin down due to continual patch repairs) it is inevitable that they weren't all in use at the same time. However, given that a search for absent hovels wasn't undertaken in eight parishes, the total number of hovels built over time will be higher than the 1575 identified.

A relatively small number of buildings highlighted by the historic map search, just 23, turned out to not be a hovel when visited. Due to this low proportion, it is likely that the 1284 records of absent hovels are a relatively accurate reflection and does not contain too many buildings used for other purposes.

Survival and condition

Over 1500 hovel sites have been identified in the Vale of Evesham. Of these, only 250 survive, which is just 16% of the total that once existed. An assessment of each building's condition shows that a third of surviving hovels are already in the process of collapse, meaning that just 171 – approximately 1 in 10 hovels – are extant with four walls and a roof.

Most extant hovels are also in a state of decay, often covered or surrounded by brambles, ivy and other dense vegetation. A few hovels do continue to be used, often for storage, but the vast majority appear to have been abandoned.

Construction

There is a wide variety of construction styles seen in the few extant hovels. These buildings are as varied as the individuals who built and used them, as they were typically built with whatever materials were to hand and to meet the grower's own purposes. In many cases, it appears that the hovel started off small, but as the needs of the owner changed extensions were added until the structure became quite large. Photographs of various types and conditions of hovels are shown below.

The most common building type is a timber frame, with corrugated metal sheets on the walls and roof. A mix of corrugated metal and wooden cladding is also frequently seen. The basic design is a rectangular structure with a single door and window, often on the same elevation, with the other three elevations fully clad. The roof is often mono-pitch, higher over the door and sloping slightly to the rear. The inability to survey inside hovels meant that there is a limited record of the interiors. However, where visible, the floor is typically compacted earth and most did not contain any internal features, although shelves and a work bench are the most common fixtures encountered.

Those best preserved are generally built of brick with tiled roofs and are sometimes two-storeys high. A few still have evidence of a brick chimney and are likely to have been used as accommodation for seasonal or temporary workers.



Photo 1: Basic design



Photo 2: Extended version



Photo 3: Timber construction



Photo 4: Brick construction with additional lean-tos



Photo 5: Brick hovel with chimney



Photo 6: Lorry body repurposed as a hovel



Photo 7: Extant hovel



Photo 8: Ruined hovel



Photo 9: Demolished hovel



Photo 10: Overgrown hovel

Distribution

It is clear from the parish breakdown that Evesham had the highest number of hovels: 43% of the total. However, due in large part to the town's significant growth, only 8% of sites survive and only 4% are extant. These proportions are significantly less than the average for the survey area as a whole.

Those parishes covered by the first phase of the survey also have significantly more hovels (both surviving and historic) than the parishes surveyed later on. This pattern reflects the industry's origins, which began with a small number of market gardens around Evesham during the early 19th century then a rapid expansion following the arrival of the railway. From the 1870s, farmland in surrounding villages was divided up into market garden plots at a rapidly growing rate.

A search for historic hovels was not undertaken in many parishes west of Evesham or around Pershore itself, so the true distribution of hovels here is not known. Consequently, the smaller numbers of surviving hovels west of Evesham could either be a result of lower survival rates or due to fewer hovels being built here in the first place. However, it is most likely that this pattern reflects

the true distribution of hovels as there are no significant difference in land use or building work that would have caused lower survival rates west of Evesham.

A study of historic maps and records suggests that the nature of market gardens differed slightly across the Vale, with a greater focus on vegetable growing east of Evesham and a larger emphasis on fruit trees around Pershore. It is therefore possible that this difference accounts for the skewed distribution of hovels, with fewer needed and built around the orchards of Pershore.

On a local scale, short rows of hovels can be seen – especially around Evesham and Lenchwick. In many cases, these rows line up with trackways depicted on historic maps, demonstrating growers' preference for building hovels at the end of their typically elongated market gardens. Locating hovels alongside trackways and roads is likely to have been a purely practical choice, as produce was historically left out by them for collection.

Accessing survey records

Survey records and photographs of all recorded hovels are held in Worcestershire's Historic Environment Record (HER), along with an overview of each parish. This free public database can be accessed by visiting the HER desk on level 2 of The Hive in Worcester or submitting an online enquiry via Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service's website. A limited version of the HER is also available online through the Heritage Gateway website.

Alongside the hovels survey, the Market Gardening Heritage project restored three hovels as public heritage sites, collected oral histories and created online resources for educational and reminiscence use. Hovels were significant social hubs as well as practical buildings, as captured in the recorded oral histories. To listen to these memories and find out more about market gardening, including the people behind it all and the industry's nationwide reach, visit the project online at www.explorethepast.co.uk/projects

Further research

A number of research areas lay beyond the scope of this survey or have been brought to light by its results:

- When were hovels built and how long did they typically remain in use? Do different construction styles differ in date? And are brick hovels the earliest surviving examples?
- Identification of historic hovels in and around Pershore
- Understand the reasons behind the distribution of hovels – does this follow differences in the type of crops grown, soils, land ownership, collection methods or other factors?
- Where does the name 'hovel' come from and how did its use differ across the Vale of Evesham?

Summary

This survey is the first systematic record of market gardeners' hovels across the Vale of Evesham. It provides a snapshot of the variety, location and condition of these unique historical buildings as of 2018-2021. From these records, it is evident that hovels were an integral part of the area's market gardening with over 1500 being built, yet they are rapidly being lost to changing land use and decay. As of 2021, approximately 170 hovels survive as intact buildings. There is no doubt that this number will dwindle significantly over the coming years, but a written and photographic record of them has been preserved for future generations.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks are due to the 22 local volunteers who so generously gave their time and enthusiasm to undertake the survey and scour the countryside for hovels whilst vegetation was low (and weather cold!). A significantly larger area than originally planned has been covered, which is all credit to their dedication.

Training, support and guidance for the survey was provided by Worcestershire Farmsteads Project, for which many thanks go to Dr Alan Wadsworth.

Finally, thank you to everyone who shared historic photos or information with the survey, as well as the landowners who kindly gave permission for hovels on their land to be recorded, including The Dean and Chapter of Christ Church, Oxford.

