

Akeley and Stockholt

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Akeley is relatively well provided for in terms of its documentary inheritance. The manor belonged to the priory of St Faith at Longueville in Normandy from about 1150 until 1414, at which time it passed into the possession of Sir Ralph Rochefort as a result of a general confiscation by Henry V of the English properties of alien religious houses. After Ralph's death in 1441 Henry VI granted Akeley together with the other Longueville lands 'to the Warden and Fellows of New College [in Oxford], whose possessions are diminished and insufficient to maintain their burdens, in order that they may in future pray more heartily for the said king'. Many of the documents upon which the following study is based are still preserved among the muniments of New College, Oxford.

The earliest description of Akeley is that recorded in Domesday Book in 1086. This suggests a small place, of three hides, with a recorded population of two villeins, four bordars and two slaves. Half a plough team of four oxen was present on the demesne and the commissioners recorded that a further two ploughs were possible. The tenants also held 2½ ploughs. Assuming a hide of approximately 120 acres of arable, it is possible to tentatively locate the Domesday fields of Akeley in the area of the three common fields which we know existed from later medieval documentary evidence, 18th-century cartographic evidence, and archaeological fieldwork. Domesday Book also records that the manor possessed sufficient meadow to support one plough team and a large amount of woodland, enough to feed 806 swine. We know very little about Akeley before the Norman Conquest, beyond the fact that it was held by Alric son of Goding, a very considerable landowner in Buckinghamshire before 1066, and was valued at £3.

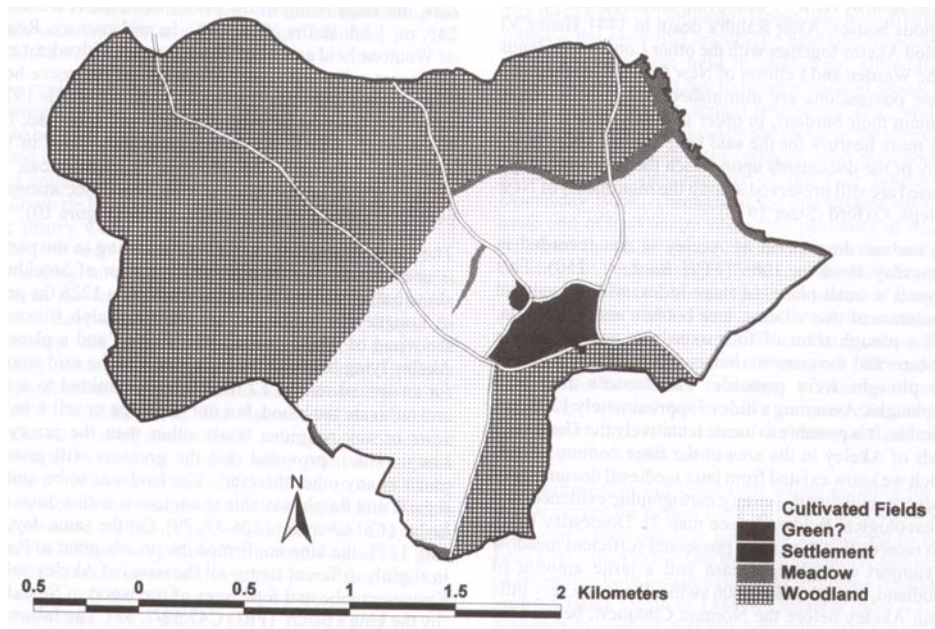


Figure 1: Landscape and settlement in Akeley c.1100

Some evidence may be advanced to support the idea that a settlement at Akeley was formed at a relatively late date, perhaps in the 10th century. Before 1173 it was decided that the church of Akeley was a daughter church of Leckhampstead, and that it ought to pay 2s. a year as a sign of this dependence. The church at Akeley was described in this agreement as

a chapel, that at Leckhampstead as the mother church. This suggests that Akeley was formerly part of a much larger estate centred on Leckhampstead, from which it was later divided, and from where it may have been colonised. The fission of large estates into smaller manors, vills and parishes is often assumed to have occurred in the late Anglo-Saxon period. However, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that a settlement at Akeley existed long before that time. Thus, although the documentary evidence tells us little about the origins and development of Akeley before the 11th century, the relationship between the two churches of Akeley and Leckhampstead is at least suggestive of the movement of people from east to west and of the expansion of settlement in both parishes before the Norman Conquest.

It seems likely that the Domesday settlement of Akeley and its fields lay between two areas of woodland, and that extensive clearance of woodland had taken place in the early Middle Ages. This would make sense of the place-name 'Akeley', meaning 'Aca's clearing'. Further clearance of woodland took place in the post-Conquest period, for which some documentary evidence survives. For example, assarts of eight acres and $1\frac{3}{4}$ acres belonged to the prior of Longueville in the early decades of the 13th century. Both were sown with oats, the latter being in the prior's demesne. In mid-century, Roger de Wautone held assarts of 20 acres sown with wheat and $38\frac{1}{2}$ acres sown with oats. Adam son of the reeve held $\frac{3}{4}$ acre sown with oats. The location of these assarts is not specified, but the general areas in which assarting took place in the centuries following the Norman Conquest can be suggested by a combination of field work, documentary evidence, and the study of place-names.

The most spectacular example of assarting in the parish is undoubtedly the creation of the manor of Stockholt, about half a mile north-west of Akeley. In 1228 the prior of Longueville confirmed his grant to Ralph Briton of the wood of Akeley called Kingstowe, 'and a place in Akeley lying between the high road and the said wood', for an annual rent of £2. Ralph was permitted to assart and cultivate the wood, but not to pledge or sell it to the Jews or any religious house other than the priory of Longueville, 'provided that the grantors will give as much as any other therefor'. The land was to be quit of regard, and Ralph was able to enclose it with a ditch and hedge. On the same day, 30 July 1228, the king confirmed the prior's grant to Ralph in slightly different terms: all the wood of Akeley called Kyngesscrabbe and four acres of the wood of Stockholt 'by the king's perch'. The following year, 1229, the king granted Ralph a further 12 acres *in augmentum terre sue de Stocholt*. Further assarting is likely to have taken place at much the same time, Stockholt rapidly assuming the status of a small manor: it was listed as such among the possessions of the overlord, Gilbert Marshal, in 1235.

The exploitation of the woodland at Stockholt continued throughout the 13th century. In 1255 Gilbert Marshal was said to have sold and destroyed part of the wood of Akeley called Stockholt, and in 1279 the prior of Longueville brought an action for trespass against William de Brewes for taking housebote and haybote 'in the prior's wood called Stockholt within the forest of Whittlewood'. According to the forest eyre of 1255, four poachers entered the wood of Stockholt with bows and arrows, whose base was said to be the house of Roger de Wautone, the holder of some substantial assarts in Akeley, who had made a ditched purpresture (perhaps the location of his house) in Stockholt wood. The clearance of woodland at Stockholt allowed arable fields belonging to Stockholt manor to be laid out, and at some point a park was created. This was extended by 300 acres in 1412 by enclosing an adjoining field called 'Homfeld' of 200 acres and a wood called 'Kyngesshrobfeld' of 100 acres. The boundaries of the park can still be detected in the curving shapes of the hedgerow boundaries to the fields, marked by deeper than usual ditches.

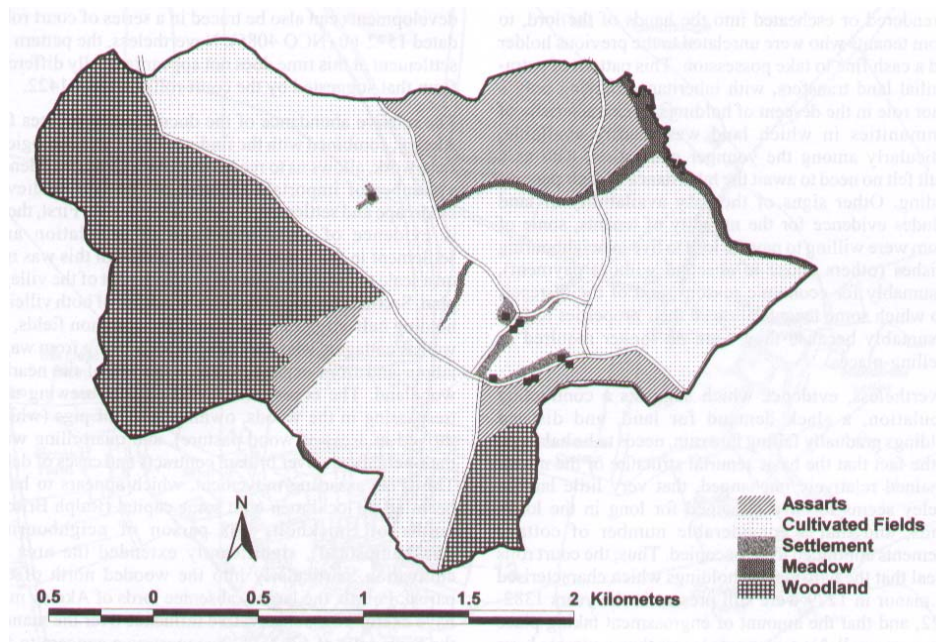


Figure 2: Landscape and settlement in Akeley c.1300

In 1279 the recorded population of Akeley was 22, nearly three times what it had been in 1086. The three hides of Domesday Book were now divided as follows: the prior of Longueville held one in demesne; seven virgates were held in villeinage, although the Hundred Rolls in fact list 15 tenants, each of whom held half a virgate for an annual rent of 1s. 10d.; and the remaining virgate was held by the rector of the church. In addition, four tenants held cottages, who may perhaps have been the descendants of the four bordars of Domesday Book. Throughout the late Middle Ages, the basic unit of land tenure among the peasantry of Akeley remained the half-virgate, held in conjunction with the buildings of the messuage. The size of the half-virgate at Akeley is uncertain but probably consisted of between 16 and 20 acres divided into strips, which were scattered across the manor's three open fields. The location of the messuages is rarely specified, although in 1405 one was said to lie beside the cemetery of Akeley church. Moreover, a house lay between the chamber (presumably free-standing) and the barn of the messuage.

The earliest series of court rolls which survives for the manor covers the period 1382 to 1422, a time when population is generally considered to have been lower than in the late 13th century, as a result of the outbreak of successive waves of plague beginning with the Black Death of 1348-9. Certainly there is some evidence to suggest that the peasantry of Akeley took advantage of the greater availability of land which followed a decline in population. For example, very few tenants inherited land and most holdings were surrendered or escheated into the hands of the lord, to whom tenants who were unrelated to the previous holder paid a cash fine to take possession. This pattern of extra-familial land transfers, with inheritance playing only a minor role in the descent of holdings, is characteristic of communities in which land was readily available, particularly among the younger generation, who as a result felt no need to await the inheritance of their parents' holding. Other signs of the easy availability of land includes evidence for the mobility of tenants, some of whom were willing to pay the lord to live in neighbouring parishes (others chose to abscond without payment), presumably for economic reasons, and of the disrepair into which some tenants allowed their properties to fall, presumably because they were no longer required as dwelling-places.

Nevertheless, evidence which suggests a contracting population, a slack demand for land, and disused buildings gradually falling into ruin, needs to be balanced by the fact that the basic tenurial structure of the manor remained relatively unchanged, that very little land at Akeley seems to have remained for long in the lord's hands, and that a considerable number

of cottage tenements continued to be occupied. Thus, the court rolls reveal that the half-virgate holdings which characterised the manor in 1279 were still present in the years 1382-1422, and that the amount of engrossment taking place was very small. No tenements larger than a virgate have been found, and relatively few holders of half a virgate seem to have accumulated tofts, cottages and cotlands. The lord appears to have had few difficulties in securing new tenants for those half-virgate holdings which were surrendered, although the entry fines levied might vary considerably. The number of cottage tenements remaining unoccupied appears to have been larger, but even for these holdings entry fines could often be extracted from incoming tenants. Thus, although the court rolls suggest some shrinkage of population and settlement from a pre-Black Death height (the extension of the park at Stockholt may serve as further evidence of this), Akeley does not appear to have undergone any kind of late medieval crisis.

The relative stability of the landscape and settlement pattern at Akeley continued into the 17th century. The three common fields of the medieval centuries were still in existence in 1639 when the glebe terrier reveals land divided between 'the field' (or Ley Field), Churchill Field, and Stockwell Field. A rental of 1631 shows that a number of tenants continued to hold a single messuage and half-virgate (or half-yardland as they are now described) just as their medieval predecessors had done. Others, such as Agnes Hodges, a single woman, continued to occupy cottage tenements. There is, however, more evidence for engrossment than can be found in earlier documents, suggesting that some successful tenants were able to accumulate land more easily than in previous centuries and that a degree of social polarization had occurred as a result. Several tofts are also listed, revealing either that the late medieval shrinkage of Akeley had not been reversed or that further buildings had fallen into ruin and been swept away. An increase in enclosure is also apparent. These developments can also be traced in a series of court rolls dated 1522-60. Nevertheless, the pattern of settlement at this time does not appear radically different from that suggested by the court rolls of 1382-1422.

The relative abundance of the documentary sources for Akeley, combined with the findings of the archaeological field work, allows us to reconstruct with some confidence a number of important features of the late medieval landscape and settlement pattern of the parish. First, there is evidence of some shrinkage of population and settlement in the late Middle Ages, although this was not on a scale to radically affect the basic layout of the village plan. Second, the population was made up of both villeins holding half-virgates who farmed the common fields, as well as cottagers who may have made a living from wage labour and from exploiting the resources of the nearby woodland. The court rolls reveal tenants brewing ale, trespassing in the woods, owning herds of pigs (which thrived in areas of wood pasture), and quarrelling with their neighbours over broken contracts and cases of debt. Third, the assarting movement, which appears to have been led by local men with some capital (Ralph Briton, holder of Stockholt, was parson of neighbouring Leckhampstead), significantly extended the area of cultivation, particularly into the wooded north of the parish. Fourth, the largely absentee lords of Akeley may have exercised a conservative influence over the manor, the court rolls of 1382-1422 suggesting a concern to fill tenancies and repair properties, to ensure that watercourses and roads were not obstructed, and to maintain the cultivation of the land. Though small, late medieval Akeley appears to have remained a place in which a significant number of peasant families found the opportunity to make a living.