

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LIX

JANUARY 1966 TO DECEMBER 1966

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THE CHURCH OF ST MARY OF HUNTINGDON

CYRIL HART

AMONG the gifts bestowed by King Edgar upon the newly refounded abbeys of the eastern fenland, were two whose remarkable similarity has hitherto passed unnoticed. In the year 969, at the request of Bishop Oswald of Worcester, he gave the church and three hides of land at Godmanchester to Oswald's foundation at Ramsey. The gift formed part of that abbey's foundation endowment.¹ Four years later, at the request of Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester, King Edgar endowed Æthelwold's foundation at Thorney with the church of St Mary of Huntingdon, together with its cemetery and three hides of land pertaining to that church.²

Both Oswald and Æthelwold purchased many properties from Edgar for the endowment of their new foundations, but in the case of these two churches the records of Ramsey and Thorney make it quite clear that they were grants by Edgar in alms for his soul. 'With this single exception', says the account in the Thorney foundation charter, 'all the estates obtained by Bishop Æthelwold from King Edgar were paid for with the appropriate sum of money, be it great or small.'

The church at Godmanchester can hardly be other than the precursor of the present parish church of St Mary there, which preserves in its fabric some twelfth-century work, and it is likely that the dedication to St Mary was its original one, as in the case of its companion church at Huntingdon on the opposite bank of the Ouse. An important paper by H. J. M. Green has recently demonstrated the significance of this Ramsey record for reconstructing the topography of early medieval Godmanchester.³

Edgar's endowment of Ramsey was soon alienated;⁴ so too was one of the hides belonging to St Mary's, Huntingdon,⁵ but the remaining two hides, together with the church itself, survived as a possession of Thorney Abbey for nearly a century. An Ely record mentions the cost of mill-oxen for the estate, towards the end of the

¹ *Chronicon Abbatiae Ramesiensis*, ed. W. Dunn Macray (R. S., 1886), pp. 47-8.

² *Cartularium Saxonicum*, ed. W. de Gray Birch, III (1893), no. 1297, from the Red Book of Thorney. I have re-edited this charter in my forthcoming *Early Charters of Eastern England*, now in the press.

³ *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, LIV, (1960), pp. 90-6.

⁴ *Chron. Rames.* pp. 48-9. Oswald gave it back to Edgar in part exchange for Wistow (Hunts.), which was nearer to the abbey.

⁵ An unpublished version of the Thorney Foundation Charter (C.U.L. MS Add. 3020, fo. 13^v-15), which contains important variant material, states that the endowment of St Mary's was two hides 'beside Huntingdon' and one hide *aet Broctune*, which must be Broughton (Hunts). Æthelwold gave this hide to Ramsey in exchange for land which he used to endow his foundation at Ely (*Chron. Rames.* pp. 74-5).

reign of King Æthelred.¹ In the time of the Confessor, however, the abbot of Thorney gave the church, and the land annexed to it, in pledge to the burgesses of Huntingdon. This was duly recorded in an entry which heads the *Clamores* at the end of the Huntingdonshire section of the Domesday Survey (fo. 208a-b); the entry then goes on to describe a remarkable series of transactions, in which the ownership of the church changed hands no less than six times in one generation. As Sir Frank Stenton has pointed out² 'the whole passage which deals with its pre-Conquest history is important for the naïve recognition by everyone concerned that the church in question was a piece of property, to be sold or given in pledge to suit the convenience of its possessor'. In view of what follows, it is expedient to quote in full the V.C.H. translation of the entry:³

The jurors of Huntingdon say that the church of Saint Mary of the Borough and the land which is annexed to it belong to the church of Thorney, but the abbot gave it in pledge to the burgesses. Moreover, King Edward⁴ gave it to Vitalis⁵ and Bernard,⁶ his priests, and they sold it to Hugh, King Edward's chamberlain.⁷ Moreover, Hugh sold it to two priests of Huntingdon, and they have thereof the seal of King Edward. Eustace has it now without livery, without writ, and without seisin.

It is an extraordinary fact that the Huntingdonshire Domesday contains two further entries relating to this series of transactions, which combine to throw a flood of light on the early history of the church, and indeed the town of Huntingdon itself. The first of these occurs in the opening section of the Huntingdonshire portion of the Survey (DB fo. 203), which commences with the statement:⁸ 'In the Borough of *Huntedone* there are four quarters (*ferlingi*).' The first two quarters are then described together, and since one of them included the site of the castle, we may assume that the two quarters (or wards) comprised that half of the town lying to the south-west of the present High Street.⁹ Next comes a description of the second two quarters—

¹ *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. A. J. Robertson (2nd edn., 1956), pp. 253-5. This section of the MS is dated to the first quarter of the eleventh century by N. Ker, *Catalogue of MSS Containing Anglo-Saxon* (1957), pp. 126-7. The mill is again mentioned in the Domesday Survey of Huntingdon. The tithes of the mill belonged to the priory of St Mary's, Huntingdon, until the Dissolution (*V.C.H. Hunts.* II (1926), p. 135).

² *V.C.H. Hunts.* I, p. 325.

³ *Ibid.* p. 334.

⁴ F. Barlow, *The English Church 1000-1066* (1963), pp. 192-3, suggests that the abbot pledged the church to the burgesses as a security for a loan, and the King redeemed it.

⁵ The royal priest Vitalis held also a church in Wilts. (DB fo. 65b).

⁶ For the royal priest Bernard, see W. H. Stevenson, 'An Old-English charter of William the Conqueror in favour of St Martin's-le-Grand, London', *English Historical Review*, XI (1896), p. 744.

⁷ For Hugh or Hugelin, see Barlow, *op. cit.* pp. 222-4.

⁸ *V.C.H. Hunts.* I, p. 337.

⁹ The section of the survey describing the first two quarters of the town includes a statement that of the 116 burgesses in this area, Ramsey Abbey had the soke of 10 T.R.E., but Eustace the sheriff had taken them away wrongfully from the abbey. Later, the account goes on to say: 'Geoffrey the bishop (of Coutances) has one church and one house of the aforesaid which Eustace took away from St Benedict (of Ramsey), and the same saint is still claiming them.' The church in question may be identified with the precursor of the present parish church of All Saints on the south side of High Street, the oldest surviving portion of which dates from the thirteenth century. Eustace gave it to his foundation of St Mary's Priory, Huntingdon. The footnote on this passage by Sir Frank Stenton in *V.C.H. Hunts.* I, p. 338, n. 1, stands in need of revision. So too does the interpretation of Huntingdon's early topography put forward by S. Inskip Ladds in his paper 'The Borough of Huntingdon and Domesday Book', in *Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire Archaeological Society Transactions*, v (1936), pp. 105-12.

which I believe to be those lying to the north east of High Street—terminating in the following passage:

... in these two quarters Borred and Turchil T.R.E. had one church with two hides of land and 22 burgesses with houses belonging to the same church with sake and soke, all which Eustace has now. Wherefore these men claim the King's mercy. Nevertheless these 22 burgesses give every custom to the King.

The significance of this entry is entirely lost until it is compared with yet a third passage, taken from the body of the Survey, among the descriptions of the sokelands of Eustace the Sheriff (DB, fo. 206):¹

In *Botuluesbrige* Boret and Turchil the priests had a church of St Mary's with two hides of land (assessed) to the geld. There is land for two ploughs. Now they themselves hold it of Eustace, and have two ploughs there and three acres of meadow. *Tempora regis Edwardi* it was worth 40s. (and it is worth the same now).

One cannot escape the conclusion that these three Domesday entries all refer to the same holding, and that Borred (OE Beornræd) and Turchil were the two priests to whom Hugh the chamberlain sold the church of St Mary, Huntingdon T.R.E., and who, in spite of having been confirmed in their tenure by a writ of Edward the Confessor, were nevertheless dispossessed of their tenancy-in-chief by Eustace the Sheriff, and subsequently held under him.

We have next to explain how the last entry quoted comes to be rubricated in Domesday under Eustace's sokelands lying in Norman Cross hundred, in the north of the county, very many miles from Huntingdon itself. The explanation is interesting, though somewhat involved. Although William II is credited with having given the hundred (or more correctly two hundreds)² of Norman Cross to Thorney Abbey, in reality his charter³ was probably no more than a confirmation of the abbey's existing rights, for it was by far the largest landowner in the district long before Domesday, and the hundred meeting-place at Norman Cross lay within the bounds of an estate at Yaxley which was given to the abbey by Æthelwold soon after its foundation.⁴ In short, Norman Cross was a private double hundred in the lordship of Thorney Abbey long before the Conquest. Now in spite of Eustace's usurpation, Thorney Abbey continued to have interests in the estate of St Mary of Huntingdon right up to the time of the Dissolution. A charter entered in the Chartulary of St Mary's shows that the two hides there owed soke at the hundred court of Thorney Abbey at Norman Cross,⁵ and it could well be that St Mary's also gelded in Norman Cross hundred.

¹ *V.C.H. Hunts.* I, p. 349a. The uniqueness of this entry is further emphasized by the Domesday clerk's marginal insertion of the rare symbol 'T' for *terra*—land difficult to classify (cf. *V.C.H. Hunts.* I, pp. 323-4, and R. Weldon Finn, *An Introduction to Domesday Book* (1963), p. 49, n. 2).

² Robertson, *op. cit.* p. 73.

³ C.U.L. Add. MS 3020, fo. 19; cf. H. Cam, *Liberties and Communities* (2nd edn., 1963), p. 186.

⁴ *Cart. Sax.* no. 1297.

⁵ W. N. Noble, 'The Cartulary of the Priory of St Mary of Huntingdon', in *Cambs. and Hunts. Arch. Soc. Trans.*, IV (1930), pp. 89-280 *passim*; see also C. Johnson and H. A. Cronne, *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, II (1956), p. 179, no. 1359.

We have not yet accounted for the statement in the last of our three Domesday entries, that the church of St Mary was situated in *Botuluesbrige*. That there was a place called *Botuluesbrige* in Norman Cross hundred, is apparent from another entry in the Huntingdonshire Domesday (fo. 203b) relating to a five hide estate there together with its own church and priest, held by the king and rubricated under that hundred.¹ The name has all but disappeared in recent times,² but the place lay between Woodston and Orton Longueville, and in the medieval period a bridge spanned the River Nene at this point, some distance to the west of Peterborough Abbey.

There seems to be only one explanation of these DB entries: there must have been *two* bridges dedicated to St Botolph. He was, after all, the patron saint of wayfarers,³ and his cult was strongest in eastern England; Thorney itself preserved some of his relics.⁴ One bridge spanned the Nene near Peterborough, and the other carried the road from Godmanchester across the River Ouse at Huntingdon. The present bridge there was built *c.* 1300, and once had a chapel dedicated not to St Botolph, but to St Thomas of Canterbury. The earlier bridge, swept away in a flood in the winter of 1293-4, could well have been dedicated to St Botolph, and I believe that the original name of the ward in which St Mary's church lay was quite possibly St Botolph's Bridge Ward.⁵ It is significant that in the time of Henry III, a church in Huntingdon dedicated to St Botolph was one of those appropriated to St Mary's priory there.⁶ Its exact site is unknown, but Dr Cam⁷ tells us that 'St Botolph was the stock dedication for churches near a gate' or entrance to a town.

One must conclude that the Domesday clerks, encountering a return relating to a church of St Mary at *Botuluesbrige*, and being possibly aware that its soke was in Norman Cross hundred, listed it in error with the rest of Eustace's lands in that hundred, where lay the only Huntingdonshire *Botuluesbrige* of which they knew. The facts do not appear to admit of any other simple explanation.

The Domesday entries make it plain that St Mary's was a collegiate church staffed by two priests in the time of the Confessor; and its large early endowment, together with the early reference to its cemetery, is sufficient proof that it was the mother church of Huntingdon. It is now becoming apparent that these late Saxon collegiate minsters were often used by their Norman owners for the foundation of family

¹ This holding, says the DB entry, had 300 acres of meadow (presumably by the River Nene), which was being damaged by an *exclusa* of the abbot of Thorney. The V.C.H. translation renders this 'enclosure', but Finn, *op. cit.* p. 180, translates it more satisfactorily as 'weir'. It seems likely that the weir lay in the Thorney holding of Woodstone (DB, fo. 205a), which lay downstream on the Nene bank, adjacent to Botolph Bridge.

² It survives in a farmhouse called St Botolphs situated in the modern parish of Orton Longueville, near the site of the medieval bridge.

³ The occurrence of villages called Bottesford in Leicestershire and Lincolnshire (both *Bottesford c.* 1125) suggests that Botolph's hagiography was especially concerned with the safe passage of rivers.

⁴ *The Chronicle of Hugh Candidus*, ed. W. T. Mellows (1949), p. 63.

⁵ One of the DB wards of Cambridge was called Bridge Ward cf. Cam, *op. cit.* p. 12.

⁶ *V.C.H. Hunts.* 1, p. 358.

⁷ Cam, *op. cit.* p. 16.

priories¹ and the fate of St Mary's church is yet another example of this trend, for Eustace applied its endowment to the formation of a priory there. The site of the old church on High Street was clearly, from the Domesday description, hemmed in by burgage tenements which did not allow the erection of a range of conventual out-buildings, so it was left as the parish church of the town, and a new priory church was erected further to the north, on the town outskirts, where the cemetery now lies.² Unfortunately this too was dedicated to St Mary, and the tangled history of the two churches of this name has caused much confusion to modern writers.

The absence of a detailed study of the town's place-names hampers all efforts to delimit precisely the extent of the pre-Conquest endowment of the mother church, a matter of importance to anyone wishing to reconstruct the early topography of the town. However, two entries in the Cartulary of St Mary's Priory combine to supply sufficient information to allow of some useful if tentative conclusions. The first is a charter of Roger the deacon,³ parson of the church of Holy Trinity, Huntingdon, dated *c.* 1180, by which he surrenders to the priory 'two hides of land in the soke of the Canons by the brook', which had been held at farm of the canons by Robert and his ancestors. The second is a late fourteenth-century entry which follows a copy of Henry III's charter to the Priory, dated 1253. The entry states:⁴

The Priory and Convent of Huntingdon is built on two hides of land of the gift of Eustace the Sheriff. . . On these two hides the Church and Priory of the said Canons stands, and the Infirmary . . . and the office of the Sacrist, with the whole enclosure of the same, running even to the king's ditch and *Smerhill*, and all the houses within *Berneys*, and all the land which is within *Grymesdich*.

This last may be identified with a stream shown on early maps of the town, and on the modern 2½ in. O.S. map, rising from a spring about a mile north of the town, and running in a south-easterly direction, crossing the Hartford road to join the River Ouse. If this is the case, then the two hides were limited to the north and east by the boundaries of the Domesday estates of Hartford and Great Stukeley, which one may safely assume to have been coterminous with the bounds of the later parishes of those names. South-eastwards the two hides were bounded by the Ouse, and south-westwards by High Street. Two of the four Domesday wards of Huntingdon lay within this territory.

Before going on to discuss the bearing of all this on the early development of Huntingdon itself, it is profitable to pause for a moment to take a look at the surrounding countryside. A remarkable feature, which has hitherto escaped attention, is the way in which the town was virtually surrounded by royal estates in the late Saxon period. To the east lay the royal manor of Hartford, rated at 15 hides. South

¹ Cf. R. Lennard, *Rural England* (1959), pp. 394-404, an appendix entitled 'Some Ministers and Collegiate Churches'. To Lennard's examples may be added the pre-Conquest collegiate minsters of Earls Colne, St Osyth, and West Mersea in Essex, and Sudbury in Suffolk, all of which became post-Conquest priories.

² The portion of the Thorney Abbey Foundation Charter which describes King Edgar's gift of St Mary as a *monasteriolum* lying *extra oppidum* is of little evidential value, for it appears to embody a late interpolation.

³ Noble, *op. cit.* pp. 228-9.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 259-60.

of the Ouse lay Godmanchester (14 hides); westwards the town was bounded by Brampton (16 hides and 1 virgate) and Graffham ($5\frac{1}{2}$ hides); to the north west, only the Stukeleys separated Huntingdon from the 10 hide royal estate of Alconbury. This great concentration of royal property is unlikely to have come about by the piecemeal acquisition of individual holdings, whether by gift, purchase, exchange, or forfeiture. We have to look for a more fundamental explanation, and we find it in the circumstances accompanying the surrender of the Danish army of Huntingdon to Edward the Elder in the year 917. 'We remember well', said the old men of the district some sixty years later,¹ 'that King Edward conquered Huntingdon before he conquered Cambridge. . . and in the whole shire of Huntingdon there was no free land but that was forfeited, excepting only two hides at Bluntisham which Ælfsige *cylð* had, and two more near Spaldwick.'

There was, in fact, a tenurial upheaval, and everything fell into the king's hands. No doubt much of it was returned to those of the Danes who made their submission in good time; possibly a good deal more was redistributed without delay in small parcels to the king's followers; but there is ample charter evidence to show that large tracts of the county to the north of Huntingdon remained in the possession of the Crown for several decades after its reconquest by Edward the Elder, and even when eventually some of it was released from royal control, several of the largest estates were merely transferred to the care of the ealdorman.² The town of Huntingdon itself, with sixty hides surrounding it, the king and his successors kept in their own hands, nor was there any alienation (except for the two churches of Huntingdon and Godmanchester, with their endowments) until after the Conquest, by which time these estates had become in fact, if not in legal theory, ancient demesne of the Crown.³

With this strong royal control in mind, we can now put forward what is admittedly no more than a hypothesis concerning the early development of the town of Huntingdon, which can only be tested by excavation and chance finds as the years go by. It is suggested that the Danish army encampment of the late ninth and early tenth century was sited on the bank of the Ouse to the north-east of Ermine St.⁴ This was a strong natural position, and they fortified it. In the course of time a street now

¹ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake, R. Hist. Soc., Camden 3rd series, xcii (1962), pp. 98-9.

² Of the 188 hides lying in the two hundreds of Norman Cross, only $7\frac{1}{2}$ were in royal hands by the time of the Conquest, but we have certain evidence that a further 48 hides had been booked to thegns by royal charters between 937 and 963, and another 5 hides T.R.E; at least one-third of the two hundreds was therefore at one time in royal hands, and probably a great deal more for which no evidence survives. Only a small proportion of this could have reached the crown by individual exchange or forfeiture. I hope to enlarge on this elsewhere. As for the ealdorman's estates north of Huntingdon, most of these descended to Ramsey abbey (cf. *Chron. Rames.* pp. 52-5).

³ A remarkable entry in the Huntingdonshire *Clamores* (DB, fo. 208) states that 36 hides of land in Brampton, which Richard Engaine claimed to belong to the forest, were in fact of the 'King's demesne farm', and did not belong to the forest. These 36 hides must have comprised the compact block of royal estates of Godmanchester, Brampton, and Graffham, to the south and west of Huntingdon, whose DB hidage totals $35\frac{3}{4}$. Richard Engaine was the king's huntsman, and as such had charge of the royal forests (J. H. Round, *Feudal England* (1895), pp. 154-6).

⁴ For the original course of Ermine St. cf. Inskip Ladds, *op. cit.* pp. 107-8, and map facing p. 112.

known as High St. ran through the settlement, parallel with Ermine St. A bridge was erected to carry traffic across the Ouse from this street to Godmanchester, and the original crossing of the Ouse, together with the adjacent part of Ermine St., fell into disuse. It is difficult to say when this happened, but I would suggest that it was more likely to have been the time of Edward the Elder than Edward the Confessor, as was postulated by the late S. Inskip Ladds. We know that Edward the Elder repaired the town's defences after it surrendered to him in 917.¹

The original confines of the Danish settlement are probably to be sought within the 'two hides beside Huntingdon' with which St Mary's church was endowed when we first encounter it in 973. A mint existed in Huntingdon by the time of Edgar's benefaction of St Mary's to Thorney,² and this appears to have been sited outside the limits of the two hides, and suggests that by this date (973) the town had already outgrown these limits. The town's assessment to the geld of 50 hides which is revealed in Domesday is certainly very high, but we do not know enough about how the geld was levied; originally the 50 hides were reckoned as a quarter of the double hundred of Hurstingstone, and it may be that before the Conquest much of the geld came from the surrounding countryside, rather than from the burgesses.³ Of the early commercial activity of the town, we know nothing. Sited as it was at the intersection of the Ouse and Ermine St., it cannot have been negligible.

By the time of the Confessor, the town was divided into four wards, two on each side of its main street. It had overgrown its original defences, and in 1068 the Conqueror erected a castle to the south west of High St., which dominated both river and town. The waste and devastation recorded in the Domesday description could only have been temporary. Here was a thriving community with a mill, fishery, mint, at least two churches, and a population certainly no less than 1500. One feels that it had come a long way in the century and a half since the conquest of the Danish camp there by Edward the Elder.

¹ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

² *Anglo-Saxon Coins*, ed. R. H. M. Dolley (1961), p. 145.

³ In DB Huntingdon had 356 houses compared with 323 for Northampton, which was only assessed at 25 hides.

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