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Analysis of the Saxon Charters

with specific reference to the environment of the tenth century

Introduction

The study of pre-Conquest charters can often provide the modern reader with a valid picture of religious and burial practices, the economy, the management of land and resources, and the communication and settlement patterns of the period. A full discussion of these themes in the Fyfod study area has been produced (WPXX), from which this short paper emanates. The aim of this particular essay, however, is to scrutinise the boundary clauses of the extant charters for the specific purpose of acquiring a better understanding of the environment and ecology of the study area in the tenth century. In order to do this, any reference to tree species, water, woodland, stones and land use have been extrapolated.

As such, it is the nomenclature which is being examined, not the precise twists and turns of the boundary.

Two tenth century charters exist for the modern parish of West Overton, thoroughly described by Brentnall in 1938 (Brentnall, 1938); one delineating the bounds of East Overton (S449), the other those of West Overton (S784). An additional description of the cattle farms and downland was appended to the East Overton charter, which covers the northern part of the tithing of Lockeridge. The Saxon charter boundaries are shown on Map XX. Unfortunately no charter exists for Fyfield.

The River Kennet & Water

In 939 AD, 15 hides of land at East Overton 'juxta dirivativus fluentium successibus Æt Cynetan in illo loco ubi ruricoli antiquo usu nomen indiderunt Uferan tun' were granted to Wulfswyth, a nun, by King Æthelstan. The Latin was translated by Brentnall as; 'by a series of offtakes from the Kennet in the place known of old to the local inhabitants as Bank Farm' (1938, 119). That the settlement created in the Kennet valley was called 'Bank Farm' or 'Upper Town', clearly suggests it sat on raised ground. In addition, the 'offtakes' may be indicating that the settlement was further protected by canalisation work or bank building which could counter flooding and drain marshy ground.

Two fords are mentioned in the charters, one near the Salt House (SU 131683), the other where today's Ridgeway crosses the Kennet by a bridge (SU 119676). The latter took a metalled road across it, as it is described as a *straetford* (S784). The street is likely to be a continuation of the *herpoth* (S449) and, if a busy highway as the name suggests, a stone bed to the ford would have undoubtedly been necessary (Costen 1994, 98 & 105).

Water needed to be contained, especially on the higher chalk land. The *mere*, or pool, recorded in both the charters of West and East Overton, may have been a fore-runner of the one visible today at SU 143663 and the 'withy pond' is probably reflected in the pond still visible near the Long

Barrow at SU 157656.

Trees & Woodland

The charters refer to four species of tree; elder (*Sambucus nigra*), willow (*Salix* sp.), maple (*Acer campestre*) and oak (*Quercus* sp.). Elder grew along the banks of the Kennet. The starting point for the East Overton charter is at such a tree, possibly at the southernmost point in this stretch of the river (SU 141684). After crossing the ford at East Kennet, but before reaching the Seven Barrows, another was used as a marker (SU 119678). As elders were certainly not rare in the tenth century (Godwin 1975, 336; Rackham 1990, 187), these ones must have stood out to have been chosen as fixed points.

Across the valley, a hedge by 'withy pond' (*withigmeres hege*, S449, ?SU 157656) formed the south-eastern corner of the grant of land at East Overton. Presumably willows would have served the basket and hurdle-maker in the tenth century just as osier beds did until recently and the hedge would have been a useful source of wood, berries and plants, as well as a boundary marker. East Overton's charter refers to mappeldre lea, 'the clearing in the maple trees', which was situated, it seems, in the Down Barn area. Maple was a widely used wood, from bridge uprights to musical instruments, and coppiced well. *Hacan penne*, (Hackpen Hill/Overton Hill) suggest a penning made of oak (*æcen*, OE made of oak) was used on this downland, presumably with the oak coming from a local source.

Woodland and woodland clearances also feature prominently in the charters. There are references to *ers lege* (S784) and *hyrs leage* (S449; Hursley [Horse? lea] Bottom), *smalan leage* (S449 - small or narrow lea), *lorta lea* (S784; Lurkeley Hill, SU 123663) and *mappeldre lea* (S449). As a *lea* or *ley* appears to indicate a permanent clearing in woodland, the number of leas in this study area suggests fairly substantial natural or manmade gaps in the woodland canopy. In addition, the inclusion of *lea* as a second element may imply worship (Yorke 1995, 166-7), thus making Hursley 'the sacred clearing where horses are worshipped'. *Grafe*, on the other hand, means 'a small, defined, probably managed wood' (Rackham 1990, 46). Thus *mere grafe* (S784), 'Pond Grove', now part of Wools Grove (SU 145666), would suggest this wooded area was managed in the C10 just as it was throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods. Other descriptions of wooded areas are;

wuda (S449), *scyt hangran* (S449), the fore-runner of Pickrudge and Pumphrey Wood (SU 145658), possibly meaning the 'wood on the steep hill-side' (Smith 1970, i, 233) and *langan sceagan* 'long wood', which was situated in the area of the deserted village of Shaw and the southern part of Pickrudge and Pumphrey Wood. At the edges of this wooded area, which in the C10 was at the western edge of Savernake Forest, some settlement had already been established (*Aethelferthes sette*, S449; ?SU 156651).

Stones

Sarsen stones (which type??) predominate in this area, with the XXbrown ones?? far more limited in number. This being so, it seems the brown XXX stones were used as markers in an otherwise grey whether landscape. A *dunnan stan* stood at the entrance to the *burg* of West Overton, with another north of Pickledean earmarked as a boundary feature. *Twegen dunne stanas* (S784; 'two brown stones', ?SU 126692) divided the two Overtons and

on the higher downland, where divisions were less clear, *Aethelferthes stane* and a *stan ræwe*, 'stone row', marked the boundary between East Overton, Avebury and Winterbourne Monkton (both S449).

Stones were also used to metal tracks, illustrated by the *straetford* across the Kennet and the *stanihtan weg* (S449), 'stony way', now the route from Draycot Farm (SU 142628), through Gopher Wood and into Pickrudge Wood. The latter description may refer to either the flinty nature of the ground or the need to surface the more frequently used tracks.

Agriculture

The landscape features related to agriculture have been widely discussed in the preceding chapters, though it is worth noting here the general division of the land into arable, pasture and woodland and the location of settlements.

It is evident from the charters that the area north and east of Down Barn, as far as the Ridgeway, was downland (S449, *dun landes*) used for grazing sheep (S449, *lamba paeth*) and cattle (S449, *feoh wicuna*, 'four dairy farms'). Just north of the valley of Pickledean the land was under cultivation (S449, *yrmland on pyttel dene*), as was the land to the south and west (S449, *furlanges west heafde*), with the two settlements (S449, *tune*; S784, *burg*) and the *chiricstede* (S784) up from, and south of, the Kennet flood plain. South of the settlements the area was described as downland (S449, *dune*; S784, *scyfling dune*), with possibly some cultivation (S449, *riht gemaere*, or 'straight balk'). Across the Alton Barnes to Lockeridge road, to the west of Boreham Down, the land was probably being ploughed as we have a reference to the boundary being a *heafnod*; the headland of the field (S449). A large expanse of wood stood at the southern limits of the estates, possibly stretching as far as Lurkeley Hill. Here and there the landscape was punctuated by outlying buildings, erect stones, patches of woodland, ponds and the pre-existing landmarks such as barrows, lynchets and Wansdyke.

The picture these charters allow us, then, is one of a mixed arable and pastoral economy, with local resources such as woodland, the Kennet and the downland areas also playing a vital part. Sheep and cattle were kept to provide wool and leather, milk and meat, with the animals grazing the northern and southern downland slopes. The arable land was north and south of Pickledean and further south on Boreham Down. Savernake Forest, had been cleared of trees in places and was being, at least partially, managed. The river, with its salt house, provided fish, and ponds, pits and quarries were fairly common along the boundaries, so the inhabitants on either side could benefit from them.

Downland, fields and settlements were joined by a net-work of locally and regionally important trackways, many of which also acted as the estate boundary, indicating the bounds represented the boundaries of property and jurisdiction, but not of communities or their movement. Settlement was on the south side of the Kennet flood-plain, much like today, with four outlying cattle farm on the higher ground to the north and Aethelferthe's dwelling on the high land at the southern limits. West Overton had a church though the *burg* itself, it seems, lay 1km to the east. East Overton, on the other hand, was a simple *tune* or farmstead.