

Saxon Settlements South of the Thames

CHAS. F. TITFORD

THE area which today constitutes South London, and the surrounding districts were originally part of Surrey and Kent and their history is accordingly tied up with that of these counties. It is therefore a matter of some importance that the view now so widely repeated by historians that Surrey was first settled by Middle Saxons should be subjected to critical investigation despite the fact that it is advanced on the authority of Sir Frank Stenton. The view is based on the fact that the name Surrey is derived from the O.E. *sutherge*, and the grounds for accepting it are stated in the Introduction of the Surrey volume of the English Place-Name Society¹ as follows:

"It is clear that a district described by its own name as a *ge* or *regio* must have formed part of some larger kingdom in the age when the name arose. The name Surrey means 'southern district' and in itself suggests that the whole kingdom of which the original Surrey formed part was divided into two regions by the Thames."

One need not question the logic of this statement, and as a glance at a map shows that Middlesex abuts on the Thames to the north of Surrey the conclusion that both areas were once parts of the same kingdom and settled by the same people appears, if not self-evident, at least reasonable and, taken at its face value, acceptable. Yet it is germane to note that what a map 'suggests' depends upon its date. Less is known of the Middle Saxons than of any other Saxons and Stenton himself records that the earliest mention of them by name is in an 8th century document and further that as late as the opening years of the 7th century, London was still the chief city of the East Saxons. Thus if we can imagine ourselves looking at a 7th century map, it would 'suggest' if anything that Surrey was the southern *ge* of Essex! This would have the added weight that the existence of a kingdom of East Saxons is a recorded fact, whereas there is no evidence that there was ever a Middle Saxon king or kingdom. A closer enquiry concerning the asserted implication of the word *sutherge* in this case is desirable.

As evidence of its early application to the area south of the Thames, reference has been made to the fact that Bede, describing Chertsey Abbey, stated that it was '*in regione Sudengeona*.' In this connection, we must recall that Bede was a Northumbrian monk and wrote for Northumbrian readers; and on

this matter we can again quote Stenton. "Bede," he wrote, "regarded the English peoples of his day as falling politically into two divisions and in various passages he emphasizes the fact that the Humber was the traditional boundary between them." Thus for Bede, the whole of the country south of the Humber forming in his day the hegemony of Mercia, was the 'southern district,' its contemporary king Aethelbald styling himself "king not only of Mercia but also of all the provinces that are called by the general name of Sutangli." Even if it be assumed that Bede's term implies a specific administrative *regio* it still does not affect the issue. That Bede was not referring to the county of Surrey is evidenced by the fact that the country was not divided into counties until over a century after his death. Further, Chertsey is in the extreme west of the county, little more than five miles from the boundary with Berkshire, an area that was settled by Sunningas. Also, Bede gives no indication of the extent of the *regio* in which Chertsey stood; its name indicates that the area was originally an 'island.' There are no grounds therefore, in the absence of specific evidence to that effect for assuming that for Bede at least the term had any more precise meaning than when we today speak of a place as being 'in the South,' 'in the Midlands' or 'in the West Country.'

Even less convincing is the statement that follows that quoted above; namely "Apart altogether from the implications carried by the name Surrey, there are serious objections to any theory which assumes a primitive connection between the region and either Sussex, Wessex or Kent." Limitations of space prevent our quoting here the serious objections referred to; but there are two serious considerations of which they take no account. In the first place, as pointed out above, the country was not divided into counties until late in the Saxon period. In the earliest days of the Saxon advent, the whole of the area between the Thames and the South Coast was a single unit divided by natural features only. The other consideration is the fact that when the earliest Saxons arrived in the area, it had been under Roman rule for four centuries. It was widely settled and developed, all parts inter-connected by tracks and Roman roads, and even the otherwise impenetrable Weald could be crossed in several places by this means. What particular part of modern Surrey is claimed to have been isolated in the singular fashion stated and yet to have been the scene of warfare between

and discusses the theory more fully than in his *Anglo-Saxon England*.

1. This was written by Stenton in collaboration with others

Middle Saxons and Kent for the occurrence of which no evidence of any kind is offered?

The earliest Saxons recorded to have landed south of the Thames (in Kent) were those, named Jutes by Bede, who came with Hengist and Horsa in about the middle of the 5th century to assist the Britons against various invaders. Later, they turned against the Britons, but the settlements that they established at this time—indicated by the *-ing* and *-ham* suffixes of their names—extended in particular along the Medway and east and west across the whole northern part of Kent. This area is inter-connected with Surrey by both Watling Street and the 'primitive' track (the so-called Pilgrim's Way) that started on the Kent coast near Folkestone and crossed Kent, Surrey, Hampshire and beyond. Watling Street crossed north Kent. Additionally, in the area where it crosses the Thames, there is Tooting and a large group of *-hams* from Clapham and Mitcham in the west to Lewisham and East Wickham in the east. Westward along the Downs track are Kemsing and Chevening and a further group of *-hams* where the track is crossed by the two Roman ways from London to the South Coast. These latter afford marked evidence of connection between Surrey and East Sussex. The names of the Wandle and of Wandsworth (Wendelsworth) in the area at the northern end of the tracks, and the half hundred of Wandelmestrei and the Wandelmestrow (the early name of the Cuckmere) at their southern end, are all derived from the same personal name, Wandelhelm. Similarly, Beddington in Surrey and Beeding and Beddingham in East Sussex are derived from the personal name Beadda. Additionally, there is the close identity of the grave goods found in the Wandle valley and at Alfriston in the Wandelmestrow valley. Tribal and cultural connections are thus clearly established between those who settled these two areas (with Fletching in the route between them), and the grave goods in Surrey and Kent justify the statement of Myers that those who settled in Surrey "were certainly derived from a branch of the same folk as the Northfleet Saxons."²

Both Morris and Frere attributed the settlements in the Wandle area to the Pictish invasion.³

Evidence establishes like connections between the Saxon settlements of West Surrey and West Sussex. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the South Saxons under Aella landed at Selsey in 477. They settled eastwards along the coastal plain to the River Adur and northwards on its western side, driving the Britons from the area into "the wood that is called Andredes leag"—the western Weald. The next group of *-inga* settlements are those on the

Western Rother north of the plain and open to the South Saxons along the Roman road running northwards from Chichester. These two areas gave them also mastery of Stane Street. Apparently driving the Britons before them, at the site of the first posting station they established Hardham; and at the site of the next (Alfordean) a Roman road branches off from Stane Street in a north-western direction. In the area where this reaches the Downs track, there are five of the *-inga* settlements of West Surrey—all previously British settlements. Further along Stane Street where it crosses the same track, there is Dorking and north of it through the Mole Gap is Getingas (now Cobham). Still further along the Street is Epsom (Ebbesham) and abutting on it, Chessington. The name of the latter, like that of Chichester, is derived from Cissa, the name of Aelle's third son and probable second king of Sussex; and it seems probable that Ebbesham derives its name from Ebba, the Hwicce princess who was the wife of Aethelwath a later king of Sussex.

It is not possible to date these settlements; but at Ewell, next to Epsom, Saxon graves have been found that archaeologists attribute to the 6th century. In this connection it may be noted that there is evidence that leads to the conclusion that the earliest Saxons to settle at Cuddington, abutting on Ewell, had been posted there at the time of the Pictish invasion to guard what was then the important Romano-British settlement at Ewell. The two villages of Ewell and Cuddington would accordingly appear to mark a point where the movements of the Jutes and the South Saxons ultimately met two centuries before there is any evidence of Middle-Saxons.

How the county came to be given the name it bears cannot be asserted. It may, however, be borne in mind that S.E. England was over-run in turn by Wessex, Mercia and Wessex again. Both Kent and Sussex had been independent kingdoms whose names they could and did retain. But what we know as Surrey had never been an independent kingdom and thus general term maybe as the *sutherge* whether meaning south of the Humber or of the Thames, but having no traceable reference to settlement by Middle Saxons. This brief article can be most appropriately concluded by one further significant passage from the same source as above. Having reviewed the place and local-names of Surrey, the writers state: "the nomenclature of the county presents many features in common with that of the adjacent counties of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire but bears very little similarity to that of Middlesex, Buckinghamshire and the counties north of the Thames."

2. R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (2nd Edition) 377.

3. Sheppard Frere *Britannia* (1969) 382; John Morris *Surrey Archaeological Coll.* 56.

4. See also *Surrey Archaeol. Coll.* 66 120.