

The Late Saxon Burh at Eashing

In their note on the probable site of the Saxon burh of *Escingum* (Aldsworth & Hill 1971), the authors discussed the length of the defences required (excluding natural obstacles) for the site at Eashing centered at SU 943 437. While the identification of this site with *Escingum* is not disputed, it is suggested below that the authors' calculation of the number of hides required to man the length of defences they quote is in error.

A number of documents, known collectively as the Burghal Hideage, list the burhs (or fortified towns) of Wessex and the number of hides belonging to each in AD 920 or thereabouts (Hill 1969). No one manuscript lists every burh, and of the seven surviving versions, the Nowell transcript of an earlier lost manuscript is considered to be least corrupt. However, the other six contain important information and should not be ignored entirely.

One of the burhs listed is *Escingum* (or *Eschingum*) which has 600 hides according to the Nowell transcript and 500 hides according to the other six versions, which are derived from a common source (Hill 1969). The identification of this burh with the *ham* at *Aescingum* in Alfred's will, present day Eashing, has never been in doubt (Sawyer 1968, no 1507).

The defence of each burh was the responsibility of the men of the surrounding area and each hide of land was required to provide one man. This is known because at the end of the text from which the Nowell transcript is derived it is stated: 'If every hide is represented by one man, then every pole of wall can be manned by four men. Then for the maintenance of 20 poles of wall 80 hides are required' and a list of the hideage needed for the manning of longer defences follows. If Eashing is assessed at 600 hides, as stated in the Nowell transcript, the burh would be defended by 600 men, four for each pole of wall. This means that the length of the defences must have been $600 \div 4$ or 150 poles in length. A pole is equivalent to $16\frac{1}{2}$ feet, so the length of the defences is $16\frac{1}{2} \times 150$ which is 2475 feet. Aldsworth & Hill have measured the circuit of the site at Eashing noted above, omitting the natural defences, in this case a steep escarpment and the river Wey. It has been noted that where it is possible to check the assessment of a burh on the ground, in some cases the assessment did not include the sides of the burh covered by water defences (Robertson 1939). They state that the length of wall at Eashing which requires defending is 2130 feet. This figure can be converted to poles by dividing by $16\frac{1}{2}$, and then to hides by multiplying by 4, giving a hideage of 516. In order to allow for the medieval practice of 'rounding off' figures to the nearest 50 hides, they also quote the length of defences manned by men from 550 and 650 hides, since '600 hides' may represent any hideage between these limits. They also state that the length of wall defended by the men from 550 hides is 2063 feet, and from 650 hides, 2887 feet. However, if the distances are calculated in the same way as described above, ie converting the hideage to poles and then to feet, we find that the length for 550 hides is in fact 2269 feet and that for 650 hides is 2682 feet. Thus Aldsworth and Hill's figure of 2130 feet for the measured length of defences is well outside the accepted margin of error for 600 hides, and in fact represents 516 hides as shown above. If the length of the natural defences is included, the total circuit of the site is about 3300 feet requiring 800 hides, which is clearly far in excess of the hideage recorded in any version of the Burghal Hideage.

It is possible that the site described by Aldsworth & Hill is not the site of *Escingum*, or that the Nowell transcript is not infallible in the case of this burh. The measured hideage of 516 for this site is well within acceptable medieval limits for an assessment of 500 hides, as stated in the surviving versions of the Burghal Hideage apart from the Nowell transcript. The present author is inclined to believe that the site of *Escingum* has been correctly identified, but that this burh should be re-assessed at 500 hides.

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REFERENCES

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MARIAN GOWER