

Boundaries

1. Before the Vikings

Whittlewood lay in Mercian territory prior to the expulsion of King Burghred by the Viking 'Great Army' in 874. Very little evidence has survived to determine the territorial organization of the area at this time, or at an earlier date when Whittlewood presumably belonged to one of the Middle Angle 'tribes' listed in the Tribal Hidage of the late seventh century. Thus, we do not know whether the boundaries of shire, hundred, parish and vill were recognized as frontiers by the inhabitants of Whittlewood before these institutions were created. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether these boundaries were imposed from above by a powerful elite with little knowledge of or regard for local conditions, or whether they respected the prevailing disposition of local society.

At a regional level, Foard has argued that Whittlewood lay within a 'province' or 'regio' which comprised much of north-western Buckinghamshire, south-western Northamptonshire and north-eastern Oxfordshire, with an administrative centre at Kings Sutton. The evidence for this hypothesis is largely derived from links between places recorded in Domesday Book. These reveal, first, that long-distance relationships existed within the south-western part of the present county of Northamptonshire; secondly, that no such links existed between this area and other parts of the county to the north; and thirdly, that there were relationships between places in Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire which ignored the medieval county boundaries.¹ The implication of this research is that the shires established after the English reconquest (see below) were largely artificial creations imposed without any regard for existing territorial groupings.

Evidence from within the project area can be advanced to support Foard's theory. First, there were long-distance relationships within the south-western part of Northamptonshire. Throughout the Middle Ages, Silverstone and Whittlebury were both ecclesiastically dependent upon the royal manor of Greens Norton, about four miles to the north, while Passenham possessed rights of jurisdiction ('soke') over part of neighbouring Cosgrove. There were also links between places within north-western Buckinghamshire, such as the dependency of the church at Akeley upon that of neighbouring Leckhampstead. Secondly, there is no evidence to suggest that Whittlewood possessed any links with places in Northamptonshire to the north of the watershed between the rivers Nene and Tove. This formed the northern boundary of Foard's proposed 'regio'. Thirdly, there existed links which ignored the medieval county boundaries, notably those between Boycott and Lillingstone Lovell with the Oxfordshire manor of Kirtlington.

There can be little doubt that the boundary between Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire was largely an artificial creation which did not exist in the ninth century.² But what of the boundary between Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, especially that stretch which falls within the project area? Foard suggests that this too was permeable during the Mercian hegemony. He writes that 'not only was Buckingham ecclesiastically dependent upon Sutton in the medieval period, but also the Northamptonshire hundred of Cleyley with its royal estate of Passenham extends to the Ouse, across the river from the detached portion of Buckingham's Rowley hundred. This link between north-west Buckinghamshire and south Northamptonshire is reinforced by various commoning rights and detached minor land-blocks which several Buckinghamshire townships had in the Northamptonshire area of Whittlewood forest'. He supports this statement by reference to his figure 4, which appears to show links between Leckhampstead and/or Lillingstone Lovell with Whittlebury and Wicken.³ But what is the evidence

¹ G. Foard, 'The Administrative Organization of Northamptonshire in the Saxon Period', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 4 (1985), pp. 196-9.

² M. Reed, *The Buckinghamshire Landscape* (London, 1979), p. 79; J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 1994), p. 104.

³ Foard, 'Administrative Organization of Northamptonshire', pp. 194, 198.

to substantiate these claims? The county boundary appears to be a well-defined frontier after the Norman Conquest, a view supported by Bailey who writes that 'there seems to be no trace of administrative or tenurial links between Buckinghamshire north of the Ouse and Northamptonshire in Domesday Book, although such links may once have existed but failed to survive the upheavals of the ninth-tenth centuries'.⁴

The county boundary between Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire is undoubtedly the most significant frontier within the project area. Whether it had an impact upon the development of settlement, and whether the inhabitants of Whittlewood regarded it as important, are impossible questions to answer. But the antiquity of the frontier and its effectiveness as a boundary – if these can be established – may provide a useful piece of evidence when considering the material remains from the two counties. Let us consider this boundary as it passes through the project area. To the east, the boundary follows natural features, namely the rivers Tove and Ouse. Then, about 3.5 miles north-east of Buckingham the boundary leaves the course of the Ouse and follows a path north-westwards into the woods of Whittlewood Forest. The boundary then runs in an irregular westerly direction along streams and through woods until it meets the Ouse once again about 3.5 miles north-east of Brackley.

Can the line taken by the county boundary through Whittlewood Forest be explained? The first point to note is that major rivers often formed boundaries in the early Middle Ages. The Thames is a prime example, defining the northern boundary of the kingdom of Wessex.⁵ It might be expected, therefore, that the Ouse performed a similar function. Indeed, it has been argued that the northern boundary of the territory of the *Hendrica*, a grouping named in the Tribal Hidage, followed the Ouse as it flowed through Buckingham.⁶ Moreover, the Ouse continues to act as a county boundary both to the east and west of Buckingham, suggesting that it was recognized as an important frontier. The Ouse also serves as the boundary of the parishes on either side of Buckingham, further emphasizing the significance of the river as a territorial limit. In addition, the Ouse marks the southern boundary of the hundred of Stodfold, again with the exception of that part flowing through Buckingham. Altogether, this evidence suggests that the Ouse formed a significant frontier prior to the establishment of Buckingham as a shire town in the early tenth century and that boundaries were redrawn to accommodate the growing importance of the new *burh*. In particular, the county boundary was diverted from what appears to be its natural course along the Ouse into the woods of Whittlewood Forest.

The county boundary may fairly be said to pass through the heart of Whittlewood Forest, where the woods appear to have been at their most dense in the Middle Ages, in northern Wicken, western Passenham, southern Whittlebury, southern Silverstone, eastern Syresham, northern Lillingstone Dayrell, northern Lillingstone Lovell, and northern Leckhampstead. It may be doubted whether the boundaries of shire, hundred, parish and vill crystallized at an early date in these woods. The area may instead have been regarded as common, in which the inhabitants of the nearby settlements had rights similar to those of the 'in-towns' and 'out-towns' of a later date. When the parish boundaries finally formed, perhaps in the eleventh century, they converged in the woodland, ensuring a fair share of this valuable resource for each community. In such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising to find little evidence (*pace* Foard) of links between townships across the county boundary. The parish boundaries converged in the woodland precisely in order to avoid such complexities. Where detached territories did form they were intended to provide more distant communities (e.g. Greens Norton, Kirtlington) with access to the woods, even if this meant crossing established frontiers.

We are thus presented with a paradox. A well-defined and possibly very early frontier (the Ouse) was more permeable than a much later, rather vague, boundary passing through sometimes

⁴ K. Bailey, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Territorial Organization in Buckinghamshire and its Neighbours', *Records of Buckinghamshire* 36 (1994), p. 134.

⁵ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 102.

⁶ Bailey, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Territorial Organization', p. 134.

featureless woods. Nevertheless, if the assumptions made in this section are correct, before the Mercian defeat of 874, there is little to suggest that the county boundary was of very great significance. The woods of Whittlewood Forest were shared by a number of communities, both near and far, and other frontiers (e.g. the Tove/Nene watershed) were apparently of more importance. In practice, the inhabitants of Whittlewood may have sought to avoid travelling through the heart of the woodland for reasons of personal safety. They may thus have regarded what became the county boundary as a significant barrier. But this is speculation and the documentary record cannot take us much further. Perhaps the material remains can offer a greater insight. One issue, however, remains to be resolved. When the Midland shires were created, why were some Whittlewood communities included in Buckinghamshire and others in Northamptonshire? Why was the present county boundary chosen rather than one further north or south, on a river or a watershed?

2. Scandinavian settlement

After the expulsion of Burghred in 874, Whittlewood Forest became a border area between the Danelaw and the kingdom of Alfred and his sons. Its precise status is not easy to resolve. Hart argues that the eight hundreds of Northamptonshire lying partly or wholly to the south-west of Watling Street (the boundary established between English and Danish government in 886-90) 'present features which indicate that they were dealt with as a unit, and it is quite likely that this identity derives from conditions obtaining there before the rest of what became Northamptonshire was re-conquered from the Danes by Edward the Elder'.⁷ In this view, Whittlewood lies within the English sphere of influence.

A contrary view is expressed by Baines: 'it seems likely that Northampton and Bedford became permanent centres of Danish colonization in 877, and that the area settled from Northampton extended to the Great Ouse both east and west of Watling Street. This does not imply that all, or even most, English landholders in the area were dispossessed; the forested areas were thinly populated, and in particular there was room around Buckingham for both peoples'.⁸ A more direct Danish involvement in Whittlewood is suggested here.

The evidence for this statement is derived from Domesday Book. In the hundred of Stodfold, alone among Buckinghamshire hundreds, the number of hides recorded showed signs of both Danish and English influence. The Danish areas (based on 6- and 12-carucate groupings) were Biddlesden with Evershaw (6 hides); Lamport (6); Foscott (6); Earl Leofwine's manor at Leckhampstead (18); Turstin's manor in Maids Moreton (6); and the pre-Conquest estate of Azor son of Toti, afterwards divided between Water Stratford and Shalstone (12). The English areas (based on 5- and 10-hide units) were Dadford with Boycott; Lillingstone Dayrell; Suartin's land in Leckhampstead; Leofwine's manor in Maids Moreton; Radclive and Chackmore; Odo's manor in Shalstone; Stowe; Westbury; and Turweston.⁹

One of the difficulties of this hypothesis is that the hidation of the Northamptonshire hundreds, especially Cleley, does not appear to share this unusual mix of Danish and English methods of assessment. Hart insists that this area never came under Scandinavian control.¹⁰ Can this apparent contradiction be resolved? The answer may lie in the timing and nature of the English reconquest. This may also provide an explanation for the shape of the Midland shires as well as a reason for the position of the Bucks/Northants boundary within the woods of Whittlewood Forest.

3. The English reconquest

⁷ C. Hart, *The Hidation of Northamptonshire* (University of Leicester Department of English Local History, Occasional Papers, 2nd series, 3, 1970), p. 13.

⁸ A. H. J. Baines, 'The Danish Wars and the Establishment of the Borough and County of Buckingham', *Records of Buckinghamshire* 26 (1984), p. 13.

⁹ Baines, 'Danish Wars', pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ Hart, *Hidation of Northamptonshire*, pp. 39-40, 52.

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in 914 (*recte* 918) 'before Martinmas, King Edward [the Elder] went to Buckingham with his army and stayed there four weeks, and before he went from there made both of the strongholds each side of the river. And Jarl Thurcytel sought him out as lord, and all the holds, and almost all the principal men who belonged to Bedford, and also many of those who belonged to Northampton'.¹¹ Baines interprets this last phrase to mean 'all those who had settled south of Whittlewood Forest', i.e. in the Buckinghamshire hundred of Stodfold. The subjection of the Danes to the north (in Northamptonshire) was more difficult and followed the encampment at Passenham and the fortification of Towcester in 917 (*recte* 921). According to Baines, 'if the whole instead of part of the Northamptonshire host had submitted to Edward in 914 (*recte* 918), instead of holding out for three more years, Buckingham would hardly have been needed as a permanent *burh*, and the county to which it has given its name would probably not have come into being', in which case the land north of the Ouse, including Buckingham itself, would probably have been assigned to Northamptonshire.¹²

Edward does not appear to have imposed a completely new hidation on the hundred of Stodfold. Instead, it has been argued that the English and Danish hides were taxed equally, which meant, in effect, that the latter had to bear a burden of taxation and service some 20 per cent more onerous than their equivalent 5-hide neighbours.¹³ In Northamptonshire, by contrast, Hart has demonstrated that a fresh system of assessment was imposed on the county some time between 917 and 937. This would have removed any trace of the mixed English and Danish pattern of hides and carucates found to the south, although he appears to suggest that in the south-western hundreds the system was not so thoroughly overhauled as on the Danish side of Watling Street. Certainly, however, assessments in Cleley were considerably more complex than in Stodfold, with many irregular fractions of hides.¹⁴

This account may thus help to resolve the contradictions between the suggestions of Baines and Hart. More importantly, it appears to provide an explanation for the position of the county boundary. Those Danish landholders around Buckingham who decided to submit in 914 (*recte* 918) were included within Buckinghamshire, while those who held out were included within Northamptonshire. This hypothesis takes no account of the recent suggestion that the shiring of Mercia took place not in the tenth century, at the time of the reconquest, but as a comprehensive administrative act, perhaps carried out by Eadric Streona in 1007.¹⁵ Other questions are also raised by Baines's suggestion that 'Thoruaster of Turweston played some part in securing the submission of the Danes of Stodfold, and was suitably rewarded by the exemption of his demesne from geld'.¹⁶ Was the hundred of Stodfold an administrative entity before the creation of the shires, and did the county boundary follow the existing northern boundary of the hundred?

4. Hundreds

Hundreds are usually regarded as much older units of local government than the shires, dating back to the eighth century or even before.¹⁷ The antiquity of hundreds is often suggested by the location of their meeting-places. Many were in remote spots that may have been of greater significance in earlier times or which were traditional places of assembly. In the project area, the meeting-place for the people of Stodfold was Lamport (the 'long market'), although no trace of a market appears in Domesday Book.¹⁸ In Cleley, the hundred meeting-place was Cheley Well in

¹¹ M. J. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1996), p. 100.

¹² Baines, 'Danish Wars', pp. 20-1.

¹³ Baines, 'Danish Wars', p. 24.

¹⁴ Hart, *Hidation of Northamptonshire*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Baines, 'Danish Wars', p. 20.

¹⁷ H. R. Loyn, *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England 500-1087* (London, 1984), pp. 140-1; Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 103.

¹⁸ A Mawer and F M Stenton, *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire* (Cambridge, 1925), pp. 40, 48-9.

Potterspury, near the boundary with Furtho, at which several footpaths meet, a site of possible pagan significance.¹⁹ In Greens Norton, the name Modley ('moot clearing') provides the clue for the meeting-place, old tracks leading to these fields on the Towcester-Litchborough road to the west of Field Burcote.²⁰ These meeting-places were sited away from the woodlands, with easy access from all directions. Indeed, the shape of the hundreds may have been determined by the unwillingness of residents to travel through the woods, so that their boundaries – however ill-defined at first – were inevitably located where the woods were most dense. If the woods of Whittlewood Forest did form a significant barrier to communication, this may explain why the Danes of Stodfold capitulated before their neighbours to the north.

5. Estates

After about 850 many large estates (e.g. Foard's proposed 'regio') began to be broken up and the pieces granted to followers and family.²¹ The general pattern of the subsequent reorganization may be reconstructed from post-Conquest evidence and from parish boundaries. It may be said at the outset that no evidence has been forthcoming to suggest that territories within Whittlewood Forest crossed county or hundred boundaries. The process of fragmentation appears to have respected these frontiers.²²

The parishes of Silverstone and Whittlebury, for example, were both chapelries of the royal manor of Greens Norton in the Middle Ages and formed a detached part of Greens Norton hundred. They were probably a single estate before the Conquest and may not have been divided until the twelfth century. Whittlebury is not recorded in Domesday Book and part of it, at least, was held of the fee of Silverstone. Greens Norton was almost certainly the centre of an Anglo-Saxon great estate and minster parish, which retained an association with its various 'members' throughout the medieval period. Passenham too may once have been the centre of a larger territory than that encompassed by the medieval parish. In 1086 the jurisdiction ('soke') of part of neighbouring Cosgrove was vested in the manor, which at this time belonged in the king's possession.

Other examples of estate fragmentation may include the Lillingstones, which presumably formed a single estate of 10 hides before the Conquest, subsequently divided along a stream. Lillingstone Lovell was originally called Great (*Magna*) Lillingstone, its western neighbour Little (*Parva*) Lillingstone. There is a likelihood that Leckhampstead and Akeley were also at one time a single estate. In the twelfth century the chapel at Akeley was said to be dependent on the mother church at Leckhampstead, to which it owed the sum of 2s. a year. Throughout the Middle Ages, Cosgrove shared a field system with Furtho, a small parish of less than 700 acres, while the inhabitants of Potterspury enjoyed rights of common in both Furtho and Cosgrove. The parishes of Potterspury and Yardley Gobion were originally one, and it might be argued that Potterspury (formerly East Perry) and Paulerspury (formerly West Perry) formed a single estate in the early Middle Ages.

Altogether, the evidence suggests that the Whittlewood area was subject to the break up of an unknown number of large blocks of land, perhaps in the tenth century following the consolidation of West Saxon rule, to create the fragmented pattern of manorial lordship recorded in Domesday Book. At this time the project area comprised 13 manors in Buckinghamshire and 15 manors in Northamptonshire.

6. Conclusions

¹⁹ P. Riden (ed.), *VCH Northamptonshire, V, Cleley Hundred* (London, 2002), p. 2.

²⁰ J. M. Steane, *The Northamptonshire Landscape* (London, 1974), pp. 85-6.

²¹ C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (London, 2002), pp. 26-31.

²² The following three paragraphs are based on R. Jones and M. Page, 'Characterizing Rural Settlement and Landscape: Whittlewood Forest in the Middle Ages', *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003).

The existence of various territories ('regio', hundred, estate) in the Whittlewood area in the period 800-1100 may be surmised and conjectural boundaries drawn. These speculations, however, need to be related to the central theme of our research. Why do patterns of settlement vary within the project area? Does the fragmentation of 'multiple estates' or the creation of the shires have any bearing upon the ways in which settlement can be shown to have developed? The answers to these questions will not be easily forthcoming. But perhaps some light has been shed on the problem posed at the outset: were the various boundaries discussed in this paper imposed from above by a powerful elite with little knowledge of or regard for local conditions, or did they respect the prevailing disposition of local society? If the woods of Whittlewood Forest formed a significant barrier to communication and were exploited as common by the inhabitants of the surrounding settlements – as is the suggestion here – then it seems likely that any boundaries subsequently imposed (whether shire, hundred or parish) followed the course of frontiers – however ill-defined – already acknowledged by local people. The inclusion of Stodfold in Buckinghamshire rather than Northamptonshire may have been the result of an accident of warfare, but it seems doubtful that this disrupted any existing administrative organization.

An argument has already been put forward that there was no 'great replanning' of settlement in the Whittlewood area before the Norman Conquest, but that an older pattern of settlement was retained even though lords and/or communities may have reorganized field systems, created manors and demanded labour services from newly-established customary tenements.²³ Likewise, in this paper it is suggested that the territorial framework in which these settlements lay was also of considerable antiquity, and although new institutions were created, these probably did not significantly affect existing frontiers or patterns of organization. It may be worth pointing out that Domesday Book suggests that levels of population in Whittlewood were relatively low. One final question may be posed: can the material remains recovered during fieldwork offer any indication that the woods of Whittlewood Forest acted as a barrier to communication during the period 800-1100?

²³ Jones and Page, 'Characterizing Rural Settlement'.