

Passenham, Deanshanger and Puxley

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The ancient parish of Passenham occupied a little over 3,250 acres in the far south-east of Northamptonshire, on the border with Buckinghamshire, from which it was separated by the River Great Ouse. The ancient parish was abolished in 1951, being divided between the present-day civil parishes of Deanshanger and Old Stratford. In the 13th century the parish of Passenham contained four principal areas of settlement: the village of Passenham, where the parish church and manor house were located; the village of Deanshanger, the main centre of population in the parish from at least the end of the Middle Ages; a settlement at Puxley, an area of active assarting in the 13th century and probably before, which became depopulated and was enclosed in the 15th and 16th centuries; and the village of Old Stratford, which developed on either side of Watling Street, lying partly in Passenham and partly in Cosgrove parish. The parish of Passenham was heavily wooded in its north-western and north-eastern parts and lay within the bounds of the royal forest of Whittlewood.

The geology of the parish is dominated by heavy Boulder Clay. The lighter estuarine soils are restricted to the Great Ouse floodplain, while tributaries to this river have exposed areas of limestone and outcrops of sands and gravels lying below the Boulder Clay. The village of Passenham sits on first terrace soils above the alluvium of the flood zone. Deanshanger occupies a central position within a large outcrop of Blisworth and Upper Estuarine limestone, while parts of the modern dispersed settlement of Puxley are similarly found on Blisworth limestone. All three areas of medieval settlement thus occupied the lighter, more easily worked soils, the inhabitants of which ploughed instead the heavier, more intractable Boulder Clay.

This correlation between the geology of the parish and the principal medieval settlement pattern may be significant. Neighbouring settlements also exhibit a preference for these same soils; Potterspury and Wicken, for example, are both located on limestone. Likewise, high-status Roman buildings, as at Bradlem Pond and Wakefield Lodge, in Potterspury parish, stand on limestone, while at Deanshanger a villa site of the 1st to 3rd centuries AD has been shown by excavation to be situated on river gravels. This raises the question of whether the infrastructure (settlement sites, roads, field systems, woodland, etc.) of the Roman period survived and influenced later patterns of settlement; or is the apparent juxtaposition of Roman villa and medieval village simply a product of independent decision-making, based on similar criteria, such as access to water, by generations of settlers unaware of previous practice?

The three main areas of settlement within Passenham parish all carry names which indicate early medieval foundation: Passa's *hamm*; Dynne's *hangra*; and Pucca's (or goblin's) *leah*. The use of Old English personal names, however, does nothing to suggest continuity of occupation between the Roman and early medieval periods. On the contrary, place-name elements such as *hangra* ('sloping wood') and *leah* ('woodland clearing') signify the presence of areas of woodland which pottery evidence suggests were largely absent in Roman times and which must have regenerated before these settlements were founded. Thus, at Forest Farm (SP 739 411) in the north-west of the parish, scatters of Roman pottery found during fieldwalking suggests that an area which was wooded in the Middle Ages was ploughed in earlier times. Only at Passenham are the traces of activity sufficiently early to hint at the possibility of continuity from the Roman era. An early medieval cemetery was discovered within the village, in part of which pottery of a reported 5th-century date was found.

The earliest reference to Passenham occurs in 921, when Edward the Elder, son of Alfred the Great, stationed his West Saxon army there, while the stronghold at Towcester was being fortified. This suggests that Passenham was in the early 10th century a royal estate, capable of hosting the king and his household. It is possible that the parish church was established at

about this time, dedicated to St Guthlac, an 8th-century Mercian royal saint who was popular in the 10th and 11th centuries. Passenham was a royal manor at the time of Domesday Book, with a mill, meadow, six ploughs, and a recorded population of 16. Jurisdiction ('soke') over at least part of neighbouring Cosgrove was vested in the manor, possibly a sign that it was once the centre of a much larger territory, perhaps even a minster parish. Both Deanshanger and Puxley were ecclesiastically and tenurially dependent upon Passenham in 1086. Puxley was divided into two holdings, each of half a hide, with a single plough between them. It is likely that these represent little more than individual farmsteads. Passenham, by contrast, was arguably a key administrative and religious centre in a strategic area of Northamptonshire, close to the border with the Danelaw.

The origins of Deanshanger may lie in half a hide which Reginald, the king's almsman, held from William I in Passenham in 1086. Reginald's manor, like those at Puxley, was probably little more than a single farmstead. Domesday Book records the presence there of just one plough and four bordars. Both Deanshanger and Puxley were probably secondary settlements, established before the Norman Conquest by grants of land made by the king out of the royal manor of Passenham. They remained ecclesiastically and administratively dependent upon Passenham throughout the Middle Ages, as is made evident by records such as tax returns, which do not usually distinguish the inhabitants of the various settlements in the parish until the 16th century. Before that date all those contributing to a tax were grouped together under the single heading of Passenham (or Deanshanger and Passenham). This was in spite of the fact that by the 14th century, at the very latest, all three settlements possessed a separate field system, and that Deanshanger was rapidly becoming the main centre of population within the parish.

Although the precise origins of these settlements can only be the subject of informed speculation, something more tangible may be said about their form and development. Medieval Passenham was a linear settlement, with buildings stretching for about 500m along both sides of a lane, the mill, church and manor house all being originally located towards its eastern end. The settlement at Deanshanger developed from an original nucleus around a large green, where the main Buckingham road crosses King's Brook, at a junction with the roads from Puxley and Wicken. Puxley's form is more difficult to assess. Originally the settlement can have been no more than a scattered group of farmsteads constructed on areas of cleared woodland. However, the expansion of the settlement in the centuries prior to the Black Death and the creation of the open fields may have resulted in some degree of reorganization, perhaps leading to the establishment of a more compact settlement. One hundred metres south-west of a moated site (SP 763 423), located on Watling Street, 200g of medieval pottery have been recovered and limestone scatters observed, interpreted as house platforms suggesting perhaps settlement associated with the high-status site. The testing of this hypothesis, however, must await further archaeological investigation. A further two bags of medieval pottery from this area (SP 761 421 and SP 762 421) are housed in the Central Museum, Northampton, although the circumstances of their discovery are unknown.

There can be little doubt that the settlement pattern within the parish could shift and develop. The village of Passenham, for example, was subject to contraction, beginning possibly in the later Middle Ages and continuing certainly into early modern times. Thus, today there are no houses on the north side of the village street, although the house platforms remain clearly visible and houses are depicted on the map of c.1608. It may be that this contraction of the village began with the movement of the medieval manor house. It is likely that the manor house was originally situated at the east end of the village, on the north side of the street, in the field named Robins Leys on the tithe map of 1844. A moated site was discerned from aerial photographs and an excavation in 1967 uncovered house walls, together with pottery dating from the 12th and 13th centuries. It is uncertain when this house became derelict. Perhaps it was as early as the 14th century, during which period Passenham may not always have had a resident lord. There was, however, a manor house (location unknown) in 1402 when the king granted to John Cok of Passenham and John his son 'the houses of the site of our said manor ... with the gardens of the said site together with the demesnes'. This may have included the 'great chamber at the south end of the hall', of which the roof was repaired

with slates in 1383-4. Certainly by 1566, though, documentary evidence proves that the manor house lay to the west of the church, on the south side of the street, even if the earliest portion of the surviving building dates only from the first decades of the 17th century. The new manor house is assumed to be the work of Sir Robert Banastre, who purchased the manor of Passenham in 1624. If this is the case, it seems likely that he rebuilt an existing structure.

The abandonment of the original manor house may be associated with the disappearance of the de Passenham family, the resident face of lordship in the village for more than half a century prior to 1299. William de Passenham held the manor first, of the Ferrers earls of Derby, and then, after 1267, of the earls of Lancaster. William was succeeded by his son, also called William, who was judged to be of unsound mind, as a result of which the manor was taken into the king's hands. It was said to consist of 2 messuages, 243 acres of arable, 57 acres of meadow, 32 acres of pasture, 2 acres of wood, a fishery in the Ouse, and a total of £9 7s. 11½*d.* in rents, aids, and labour services. When William died in 1299 his overlord, Thomas, earl of Lancaster, took the manor into his own hands. Passenham remained in the possession of the earldom, and later the duchy, of Lancaster, and in 1399, on the accession of Henry of Lancaster as King Henry IV, became the property of the crown. The construction of the manor house to the west of the church, recorded in 1566, may have been the work of one of the succession of undertenants to whom the manor was granted over the course of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries.

Changes to the settlement pattern are also apparent at Puxley. Puxley lay between two walks of Whittlewood Forest, Hanger and Shrob, and was anciently associated with the stewardship of the forest. In an undated charter Henry II granted to his forester, Broneman, a demesne tenement at Puxley, which lay between the forest at Wakefield and the fee of Letitia de Ferrers at Passenham, with the houses, men and cattle there; a piece of demesne land called La Haye; and custody of Whittlewood Forest, which was to be hereditary in him and his heirs. Puxley expanded markedly between the 11th and 14th centuries, almost certainly as a result of assarting. Thus, for example, in 1250 it was reported that Hugh de Stratford had made a purpresture out of the king's demesne at Puxley, consisting of a quarter of a rood – a tiny amount of land – on which he had built seven cottages, of which he himself held two, John Page held one, William son of Elias another, William son of Robert a fifth, Richard Neuman a sixth, and John Edmund the seventh. Larger encroachments were also recorded. In 1343 Henry Gobion and his son Hugh assarted 40 acres from 'Grobyhull', which they enclosed with a small ditch and low hedge, and on which they sowed oats one year, wheat the next, and which the following year lay fallow.

By the 14th century Puxley had become a settlement of considerable size. In 1341 one estate there consisted of at least 29 houses, and a charter of 1384 reveals that open-field agriculture was practised. However, it is likely that in the wake of the Black Death and the resulting fall in population, the settlement began to contract and the fields were enclosed. Certainly by 1566 it was recorded that 'there is decayed in Puxley a tenement called Nuttces in the tenure of Nicholas Clerke and also diverse other tenements and cottages there decayed, the names and number whereof are not known'. In the 1720s Bridges described Puxley as 'an hamlet of four mean houses ... formerly a much greater number', which accords well with the view illustrated on the forest map of c.1608. The growth and decline of Puxley has still to be worked out in greater detail, but it is likely that an important factor was the village's close association with Whittlewood. The separation of the keepership of the forest from the manor of Puxley in the 13th or 14th century and its subsequent transfer to Wakefield is likely to have been of some significance for the fortunes of the settlement.