



The Origin of the Berkshire Villages.

By *Llewellyn Treacher, F.G.S.*

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The Romans were emphatically a ruling race and the remains of their occupation of the land are of a corresponding character. Military roads and fortifications are the most important, and the villas or country houses of the more wealthy class seem to have had no connection with the villages, being built on quite different sites which when their owners left were abandoned and soon forgotten only to be discovered by chance in recent times. Although in Roman times Britain was an agricultural country, and part of the tribute was raised in corn which was exported to the continent, the Romans themselves were not agriculturalists, at least in Roman villas the bath-room is more conspicuous than the barn.

Now let us pass on to the Anglo-Saxon invasion, about which something must be said, because there is an opinion widely held that many of our villages are actually new settlements founded by the Saxons on sites hitherto unoccupied. The evidence on which this opinion is based is two-fold. First it is said that the invaders either slaughtered or completely drove out all the then existing inhabitants and so took possession of their lands and property, settling themselves down on new sites wherever they thought fit, with their families and retainers brought over from the Continent. Thus the whole population was newly introduced and was Saxon. The second argument is that most of our place-names belong to the Saxon language, therefore the places themselves did not exist at an earlier time.

Now although in some parts of the country the Saxons may have driven out or exterminated their predecessors, I do not think that was the case in Berkshire, where the invasion seems to have been less a conquest than a peaceful penetration. At that time East Berks, with the adjoining part of Surrey, consisted of a tract of open heath land surrounded by a belt of oak forest and inhabited only by little groups of foresters settled in the more fertile spots. At first

this was hardly worth the trouble of separate acquisition, and the bulk of it became public land or royal forest, from which grants were afterwards made to various Ecclesiastical Corporations and a few to private folk. The western part of the county from the ridge-way southward to the Kennet was fairly well wooded, as shown by the place-name Catmore, from the Celtic *coed*, a wood and *mere*, a pond. The Vale of White Horse was a highly cultivated district with many flourishing villages, and probably formed one of the small Celtic kingdoms remaining from pre-Roman days. Objects discovered in the ancient cemeteries at Dorchester, Long Wittenham and Frilford suggest that there were Saxons in these parts before the time of Cerdic. These must have been early arrivals, and probably came up the Thames Valley, passing along after the manner of their kind till they found a country worth living in. Few in numbers but with pushing, energetic characters, they seem to have gradually become possessed of the rule of the little kingdom and to have at length transformed it into the later Saxon Wessex. In favour of this theory we may notice that the earliest seat of the West Saxon Bishopric was at Dorchester, just across the Oxfordshire border, and supposing that Birinus, its founder, followed the usual rule of the Bishops in fixing his headquarters near the residence of the King, it would appear that the capital of the kingdom was somewhere in this neighbourhood, and I would suggest the village of East Hendred as being its actual site. It was certainly one of the most important of the line of prosperous villages before mentioned, and it had other peculiar qualifications. In the parish are five distinct manors, of which one is even to this day a King's manor. Then from the village there is a straight road leading up the escarpment to the mound at the summit now known as Skutchamer Knob, but formerly as Cuckhamsley Hill, and still earlier as Cwichelmslow. It is probably a barrow or burial place of a person of importance, who may have been one of the Wessex Kings. Coming to the name of the village we find that both our recent authorities on Berkshire place-names distinguish it as a Saxon name and interpret it as meaning Hen's stream, or the rill of water hens. Now if the newly-arrived Saxons could give it no better name than this it could not have been of much importance in those days. But is the interpretation correct? It seems to me that much light is thrown on the subject by the following extract from the interesting book on the Welsh people by Rhys and Jones. In describing Wales as it was in the twelfth century the authors remark that:—"The domestic life

of the Welsh centred round the timber-built houses of the kings, princes or lords which were scattered in the valleys and on the lower slopes of the hills. . . . The dwellings of some families were duplicated : in the summer they lived in a house on the higher part of their property called the havod-dy (literally summer-house) and in winter returned to the principal residence (hen-dref, literally the old stead) set up in a more sheltered place below." The latter exactly describes East Hendred, and if it was true of Celtic Wales in the twelfth century, would it not also apply to Celtic Berkshire in the sixth? If so I think we have in East Hendred not only the earliest capital of Wessex but also, in the light of after history, we may see in it the first capital of the British Empire, and then for the real homeland of our nation we should look not across the North Sea but rather to our own County.

Further, the White Horse of the Vale is not a true Saxon horse. That, as may be seen at Westbury and other places, was a more fleshy sort of animal, while the Berkshire specimen has been well likened to an attenuated cat. Moreover, it is the creature represented on ancient British or Celtic coins. Again, near the White Horse is a spot called Dragon Hill. Now the dragon was a Celtic emblem, and was also for hundreds of years the standard of the West Saxon realm, in fact until the fatal day when

"The green dragon of the Wessex Kings
On Hastings' field went down."

If the Saxon occupation of the district was of so peaceful a nature it may be asked what became of the language of the old inhabitants, of which but few traces seem to have survived? Well, judging from the circumstances there must have been considerable confusion in this department of village life. There were the Celtic and the Roman languages, and also that of the aborigines, although it is not easy to discover what the last really was. They appear to have been practically inarticulate, using perhaps as much of the language of their rulers as enabled them to get along in their lowly social position, though of course they must have had some other means of communication among themselves, local dialects and the like, such as existed in remote country places right up to the establishment of village schools on a national system.

Into the midst of this came the Saxons with their strong language, and there is no doubt but that the Saxon language was a strong one. It had great powers of driving out competing tongues, and its survival value, as time has shown, was enormous. To-day

it, or some of its varieties, bids fair to become the universal speech. Is it any wonder that the language of the earlier peoples soon disappeared? There was no need for physical extermination, the mental and moral pressure was quite sufficient to account for it. Then we come to the question of place-names. That these are not all Saxon I have shown in the cases of Catmore and Hendred. But supposing they are it does not necessarily follow that the places were first occupied in Saxon times. At the most the names only tell us what the Saxons thought about the places when they first came into possession of them. In addition to having a strong language they also had a strong sense of the value of property, even to the extent of what has been called a mania for owning things. Consequently when they obtained their Berkshire estates they at once gave them names to distinguish them from other estates in the neighbourhood. This characteristic of theirs has survived to the present day among their descendants, the only difference being that large landowners, having more or less respect for what is already established, do not often change the names of their estates, but to find the custom in full activity we have only to observe what goes on in suburban villadom, where houses change their names not only with every new owner but also with nearly every tenant.

The disappearance of place-names of Celtic derivation may also be explained by the fact that the Celtic temperament is more poetical and loves mystic generalizations, while the Saxon is scientific and is drawn rather to individual facts. So we find what Celtic names do survive are such as those of rivers and other natural phenomena, describing the thing as it is without attempting to distinguish it from other similar things. Perhaps it is a survival of the Celtic spirit which causes us to say "going to town" when going to London, or as villagers talk of their own dwelling-place as "the village," its distinguishing name being understood, while the Saxon spirit is more apparent in the Post Office Directory, or, better still, in the rate collector's books.

To sum up, my argument is that our Berkshire villages, one and all, originated with a primitive farmstead founded near a spring or small stream whence could be obtained a dependable supply of water for men, horses and cattle. Also that the time of their foundation lay within the period, mainly pre-historic, during which the first beginnings of agriculture were taking the place of the hunting and fishing stage of human progress. They were well established before the arrival of the main Celtic tribes, the Romans found them

here and left them practically untouched, to the Saxons most of them owe their names and also a great part of their internal organization, but we need not now follow their development through the Danish invasions and the Norman conquest.

At first, and probably for some time after their foundation, the question whether the farm should remain a farm or expand into a village, and what kind of village, depended almost entirely upon the nature of the water supply. Where this was weak, as in East Berks, or intermittent as in the central chalk tract, the villages rarely thrived, except in the few instances where they were strengthened by some outside influence or happened to be so situated as to be convenient centres of trade or market towns. But where the water springs were strong and reliable, as below the escarpment of the downs, there the infant settlements made a rapid growth. Moreover in the last case, the springs being numerous and close together, so were the villages, and it may be noticed that these thriving settlements when they began to be organized into parishes soon acquired definite boundaries, while in the case of the weaker ones the boundaries long continued uncertain, there being more land around the latter than the central establishment could profitably occupy, especially in East Berks.

The village sites, once established, seem to have remained the same throughout all their after history, the development of the villages being due either to the natural growth of the farm and its dependent industries or to institutions introduced from the outside. To trace this development from the earliest times is an exceedingly interesting subject, but it is going beyond our present enquiry, which is simply the origin of the Berkshire villages.

