

DOMESDAY CHESHIRE: SOME AGRICULTURAL CONNOTATIONS

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‘There was always a large element of artificiality about an assessment imposed from above, and the hidage cannot be taken to provide any index of geographical prosperity in 1086’.¹ This comment was made in respect of Northamptonshire, a county which Tait considered bore resemblance to Cheshire in that he recognised a Scandinavian influence in the Domesday admixture of assessment in both hides and bovates.² In his introduction, Tait was much concerned with the possibility that the Cheshire hidage might correlate with an overall structure expressed in terms of five and ten hide units. In some counties, Leicestershire and Gloucestershire, for example, there seems to have been a justification for this view. Darby comments, ‘the five-hide principle is readily apparent in over one-quarter of the Gloucestershire villages’.³ In the case of Cheshire few settlements fitted into such a classification, Broxton (264c), Tattenhall (265b) and Eccleston (267a) were each assessed at five hides, while Halton (266b) was assessed at ten hides only five of which paid tax.⁴ Actually a scheme based on a four hide unit, as in Northamptonshire might have been more rewarding.⁵ Malpas (264b) had eight hides, as did Acton (265c) and Tilston (264b), Ashton (265a), Farndon (266d) and Blakenhall (267b) less one virgate, were assessed at four hides while others were variously assessed at six, four or two hides.⁶ However, Terrett is correct in saying ‘the assessment was largely artificial in character and bore no constant ratio to the agricultural resources of a vill’.⁷

A task more rewarding for the present purpose is to determine the value of the land itself, in effect, what revenue did it produce in 1066 or 1086? In Boughton (263b) for example, in 1086 there were three hides paying tax, with land for five ploughs, two in the demesne and three others held by five villeins and four bordars. The value in King Edward’s time was twenty shillings but now (1086) sixteen shillings.⁸ As a means of comparing one part of Cheshire with another the entire cash yield for 1066

1 I.B. Terrett, ‘Northamptonshire’, in H.C. Darby and I.B. Terrett, eds., *The Domesday Geography of Midland England*, 1954, p.387.

2 J. Tait, *The Domesday Survey of Cheshire*, Chetham Society, new series, vol. 75, 1916, p.13.

3 H.C. Darby, ‘Gloucestershire’, in *The Domesday Geography of Midland England*, p.13.

4 P.J. Morgan, ed., *Domesday Book: Cheshire including Lancashire, Cumbria and North Wales*, History from the Sources, 1978. That edition is paged according to the foliation of Domesday Book itself.

5 J.H. Round, ‘The Hidation of Northamptonshire’, *English Historical Review*, vol. 15, 1900, p.78, quoted by Terrett, *op. cit.* p.339.

6 *Domesday Book: Cheshire*.

7 Terrett, ‘Northamptonshire’, p.387.

8 *Domesday Book: Cheshire*.

has been computed and the percentage proportion of this for each hundred has been expressed in map form. (See Fig. 1). The situation as revealed by the map is quite striking. There is a marked imbalance as between the yield for the hundreds west of the river Weaver as contrasted with the rest of the county. Thus two thirds of the revenue for the county emanated from the hundreds of Wirral, North and South Eddisbury and Broxton. In respect of the remaining four hundreds the differences are just as marked. Northwich hundred paying 4.7 per cent and East and West Bucklow 5.8 per cent, form a central block completely in contrast with Macclesfield hundred and Nantwich hundred each yielding twice as much.

The three part assessment as instanced by Boughton, was presented as X hidage, Y number of ploughlands and Z value cash yield. By discarding the hidage as a relative abstraction the basic data of economic significance is seen to derive from the number of ploughlands and the cash yield from each settlement. Except in the case of Chester and the three wick vills, the cash yield, however determined at the individual level, must ultimately have represented the product of the agricultural output of each manor. It is true that there were other economic assets in many manors, for example at Farndon (266d) there was a mill and a fishery with two fishermen but the value set on these was not separately expressed in the assessment of the resources of the manor.⁹ In the case of Eaton, in Eccleston, (263d) what was obviously a fishing asset of considerable economic significance, was staffed with six fishermen and yielded revenue on 1,000 salmon. Although there was no specific cash value set on this fishery its significance is to be seen in the value of £10 set on the manor in 1066, which declined to £8 and then recovered in 1086 to £10. As there were only one and a half hides with two ploughlands, the value of the fishery must have been included in the overall assessment.¹⁰ However, the value of a mill is recorded in only one or two cases as at Witton (267b) where it was given as three shillings but it is not clear whether this was additional to the seven shillings for which the manor was assessed.¹¹

In respect of ploughs one is viewing these as ploughteams exercising the function of breaking up the land to yield an agricultural product having an economic value. This product could represent a subsistence cropping and/or an agricultural surplus. For the demesne the surplus could be equated with obligations in respect of meeting the requirements of liveries of corn for the demesne servants and for sale in the market. For the tenants, surpluses could be utilised to meet outgoings due to the lord for rent or taxation levies and the like, as in the case of Frodsham (263d), where it is recorded that 'The Third Penny from the Pleas of this Hundred belonged to the Manor before 1066'.¹² Whatever the use to which the output from the ploughteams was directed it is reasonable to assume that as an economic asset inherent in the composition of each manor, ploughteams and the cash value placed on each manor ought to exhibit a close degree of correlation. As in the previous exercise the total number of ploughteams for the county in 1066 has been assessed and the relative

⁹ *Domesday Book: Cheshire.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

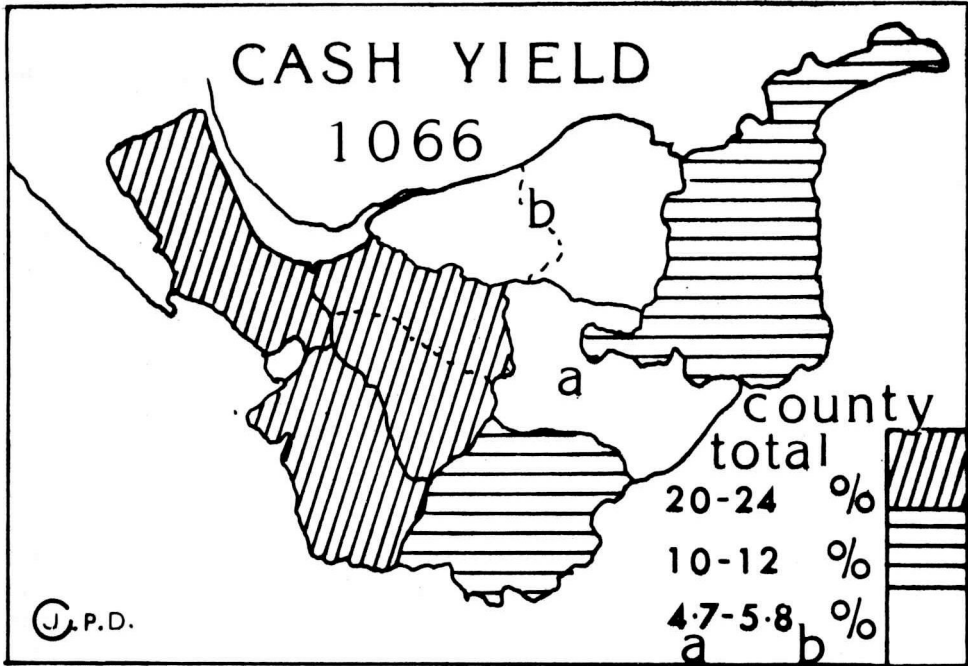


Fig. 1

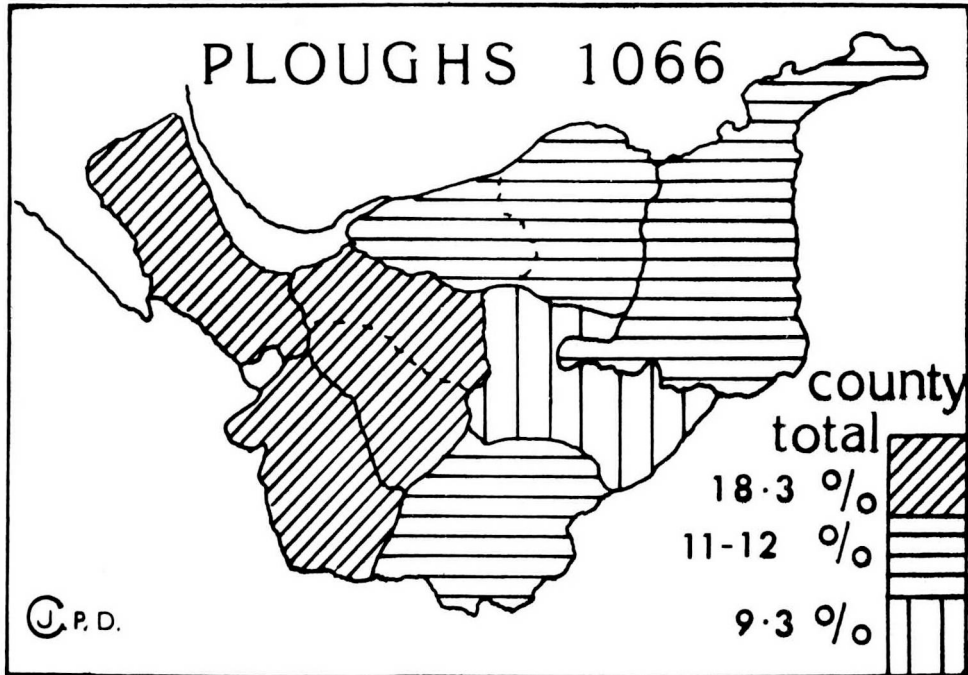


Fig. 2

proportion of this total for each hundred has been presented in Fig. 2.

In general the density of the distribution of ploughteams matches that of cash yield with 55.0 per cent of the ploughteams being found to the west of the Weaver. As previously noted the differences between the seven hundreds again arise but the basis of such discrepancy has changed. In studying the percentages for the hundreds of Wirral, North and South Eddisbury and Broxton, the ploughteams can be seen to represent only three quarters of the value shown in Fig. 1. For Macclesfield and Nantwich hundreds the percentages more or less coincide, a situation that might be anticipated to be the norm for the whole county. However when the hundreds of Northwich and East and West Bucklow are viewed, the anomalous situation arises in which the ploughteams represent double the cash yield in each case. With three such discrepant results, it is clear that a convincing explanation to fit each case will be difficult to establish. It should be said that the revenue from Chester itself and the three wich towns has been left out of these computations thus removing one possible variable.

On first consideration it might appear that the revenue from the mills might afford a solution were it not for the fact that there was serious under recording, there being no more than sixteen mills assessed for the whole of Cheshire. Even so the discordance between the data for Nantwich and Macclesfield hundreds and the three hundreds west of the Weaver could not be reconciled by reference to mill values. Conceivably while the ploughlands of Macclesfield and Nantwich hundreds were fully exploited, i.e. fully revenue productive, those for Wirral, North and South Eddisbury and Broxton were not. Some 25.0 per cent of their ploughlands were perhaps potential rather than effective units in terms of cash yield. However, this could hardly justify the situation in the remaining two hundreds where the converse would have to be argued i.e. the ploughteams were fully operative but were only 50.0 per cent productive for purposes of cash yield. There may be many other possibilities for resolving these problems but the one which recommends itself to the present writer is that differences in the lordship of the various manors in the several hundreds could have bearing on the discussion.

If a situation is visualised in 1066 where one sector of the community held a fairly coherent block of manors and was possessed of sufficient political clout either to maintain its existing taxation status or to secure taxation concessions from King William, this might afford a partial answer to the question of the discrepancy under discussion. The major contender to exercise this role was the Church, which was undoubtedly privileged under Edward the Confessor and which with isolated exceptions provided the Conqueror with unwavering allegiance throughout his reign. King William was said by one chronicler to 'be stern beyond measure to those who opposed his will but mild to the good men who loved God'.¹³ The manors of the Church in Cheshire therefore might have been more lightly assessed for taxation than those of lay lords. If this thesis possesses validity it should be possible to demonstrate this by mapping the distribution of the major holdings of the Church for 1066. (See Fig. 3).

¹³ F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edit., 1947, p.612.

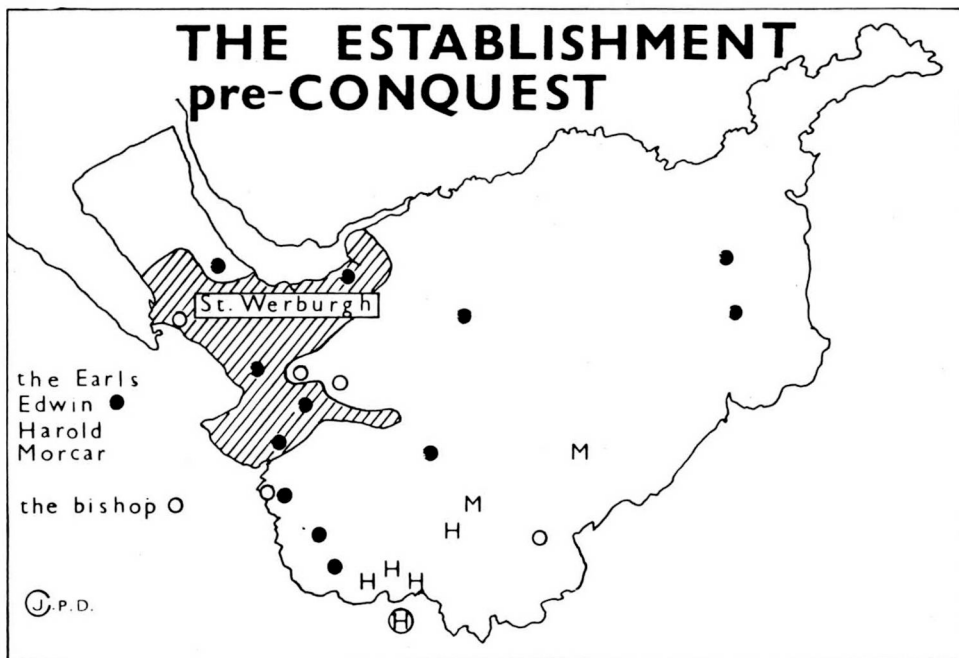


Fig. 3

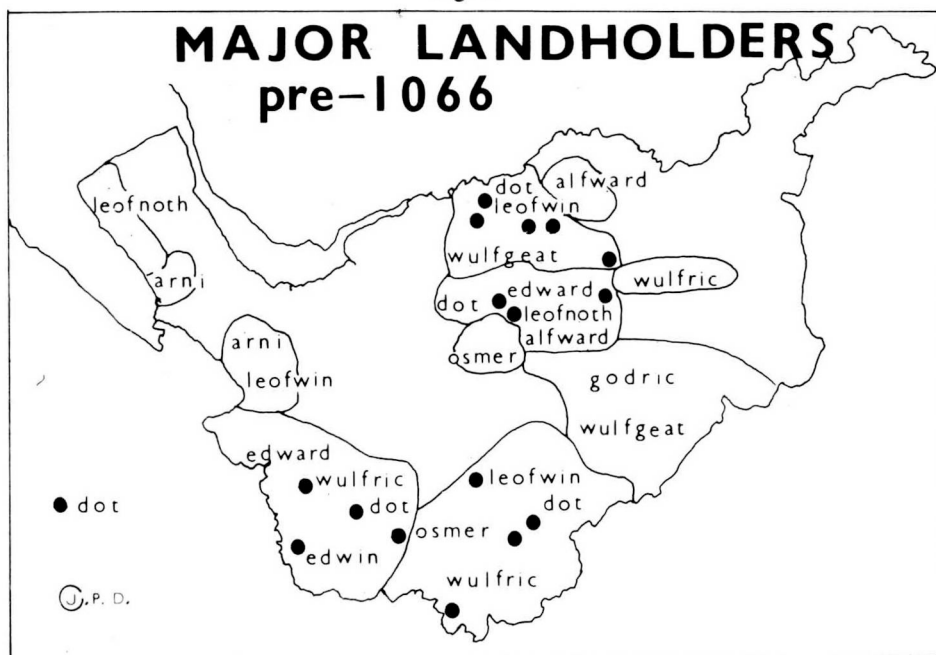


Fig. 4

The map illustrates the disposition of the manors of the bishop and the area containing the manors belonging to St. Werburgh and over which its sphere of influence extended. While it may not provide the complete answer the map indicates a considerable degree of affinity with the area embraced by the three hundreds, the ploughteams of which in percentage terms (Fig. 2) were one quarter less than the revenue to be anticipated. Supposing this view to possess some degree of credibility it cannot be further advanced to provide an answer to the problem relating to the hundreds of East and West Bucklow and of Northwich. The cash yields for these particular hundreds represented a percentage of the county total which was half that for the ploughlands. The inference to be drawn from this is that half the ploughlands were non productive, i.e., the land was there but the ploughteams were not being utilised. If this was the case then the question needs to be posed as to why the ploughs lay idle.

Fig. 4 complements the previous map but is intended to indicate the disposition of the holdings of the more important Mercian thanes in 1066. Between them the eleven men noted on the map held one hundred and thirteen manors out of the two hundred and sixty eight mentioned in the Cheshire Domesday. Chester and Atis Cross have been omitted from this computation. Of these greater thanes, Dot held seventeen manors, Godfric and Leofnoth each held fourteen and the others between seven and eleven manors. The relationship between the territory occupied by these thanes and the low yielding hundreds of East and West Bucklow and Northwich is sufficiently obvious not to require much additional emphasis. The history of these eleven men and their manors after Edward the Confessor is illuminating, more especially in determining reasons for why the ploughs lay idle in 1066. Domesday records Wulfric as retaining three of his eight manors after 1066 but holding them from Earl Hugh and Richard de Vernon. Edward who likewise earlier held eight manors, later occupied three only and as the vassal of Osbern, son of Tezzo. Edwin kept the manor of Edge (264c) with Robert, son of Hugh as his overlord and appears to have shared three other manors with Drogo, one of the new men. However, Duckington (264c), Edge (264c) and Bickerton (264c) were each described as waste.¹⁴ Wulfgeat was dispossessed of his eleven manors and Domesday records him as subsequently holding only the wasted manor of Bartington (267d),¹⁵ directly under Earl Hugh. Bartington had earlier been held by Leofnoth, who like the other six thanes, Dot, Alfwald, Leofwin, Osmer, Godric and Arni may be presumed to have perished with the Mercian host either at Stamford Bridge or at Hastings. As stated above, 'William was stern beyond measure to those who opposed his will', validation for which can be gathered from the fact that the eight manors of Alfwald were laid waste, three still being so in 1086. Dot the most important of this group of thanes left seventeen manors, thirteen of which were described as *wasta fuit* or *wasta est*, sometimes as at Millington (266a) *wasta fuit et est*. Nine of the manors of Godric and three of those of Leofnorth were also laid waste. The greater thanes who survived, namely, Wulfgeat,

¹⁴ *Domesday Book: Cheshire.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

Wulfric, Edward and Edwin were permitted to hold manors as under tenants, but as in the instance of Edward, who retained Lymm (267c)¹⁶ were somewhat ominously described in Domesday as 'he was a Free Man'.

When these thanes joined the Mercian host they took with them their carls and the lesser thanes, many of whom probably failed to return, their duty being to stand and if need be to fall with their leader. They were the ploughmen and the owners of the ploughteams, thus although the ploughland for X ploughs might remain to be recorded, if the ploughmen themselves had perished, perhaps as much as half the ploughland could not be cultivated so reducing the cash yield of these hundreds to a level matching that of the number of effective ploughmen. In the course of this discussion of the holdings of the leading eleven thanes of Cheshire, the total of manors held by them before the Conquest was given as one hundred and thirteen. Of these no fewer than sixty three were later described as waste. For the hundreds of East and West Bucklow and Northwich, this fact in conjunction with the argument presented above could well serve to explain why the percentages for ploughs were so markedly out of step with the percentages for cash yields.

Domesday references to waste relate to three points in time: 1066, c.1069-70 and 1086. For the present purpose discussion will be restricted to the state of Cheshire as it was in 1086 and with a brief comparison with the position in c.1070. Several authors in the recent period have made reference to the problems which arise from the Domesday record. In many instances the Domesday rubric is so vaguely worded as to prevent any watertight construction being placed on its precise meaning. In particular Miss Dorothy Sylvester,¹⁷ Dr. J.D. Bu'Lock¹⁸ and Mr. B.M.C. Husain¹⁹ have discussed the Cheshire references, while Dr. I.B. Terrett²⁰ has made a detailed analysis.

When King William and his men rode through Cheshire creating havoc and destruction in 1069-70, in the manner of its ruthless expression the message behind the campaign was simple but effective: rebellion does not pay. For his Cheshire subjects the end result of 1070 could still be contemplated some sixteen years later. Except probably in the case of Henry VII, who thoroughly analysed his exchequer accounts, English kings were prone to act first and consider the economic consequences later, if such a thing ever occurred to them. In the process of teaching his rebellious subjects a lesson, William destroyed a considerable proportion of his revenue from the county for many years to come. It is an interesting but fruitless point on which to speculate but had any of his associates possessed the temerity to point this out to him, would he have changed his tactics?

For Cheshire the consequences for agricultural progress were far more disastrous than the mere insensate burning and destruction consequent on the harrying of the county. Sixteen years later in the hundreds of Macclesfield and East Bucklow, six

¹⁶ *Domesday Book: Cheshire*.

¹⁷ Dorothy Sylvester and G. Nulty, eds., *The Historical Atlas of Cheshire*, 1958, pp.18-19.

¹⁸ J.D. Bu'Lock, *Pre-Conquest Cheshire 383-1066*, 1972.

¹⁹ B.M.C. Husain, *Cheshire under the Norman Earls*, 1973.

²⁰ I.B. Terrett, 'Cheshire', in H.C. Darby and I.S. Maxwell, eds., *The Domesday Geography of Northern England*, 1962, pp.356 ff.

out of every ten manors still lay in waste; earlier it had been eight and nine out of ten. (See Fig. 5). In Broxton and South Eddisbury three out of every five were wasted in 1070 and in North Eddisbury and West Bucklow one in two. Miss Sylvester has made the point that the clearance of the waste and woodland during the course of the Anglian settlement of Cheshire, was a painfully slow process.²¹ In 1069-70, not only was the process of agricultural expansion suddenly brought to a halt but a powerful impetus was given to a reconquest of great tracts of Cheshire by the former natural vegetation. Colonisation of the abandoned ploughlands, pasture and meadow was speedily accomplished by the agencies of winged seeds of trees such as the sycamore and ash, berried seeds of holly, rowan and blackthorn distributed by the birds, while brambles required little help in spreading over the landscape. When the Severn Valley Railway Trust began to clear the rail track less than ten years after British Rail had abandoned it, saplings with a girth comparable with that of a man's arm had to be cut away and grubbed up. Small wonder then that in East Cheshire the lands so hardly won in earlier years soon reverted to the status of the earlier waste following King William's exercise in repression. Subsequent reclamation and a return to expansion was slow and two hundred years later it was still to be seen in execution in more than forty locations in East Cheshire.²²

Fig. 6 illustrating the disposition of the arable land in 1086 perhaps should be regarded as a palimpsest overlying the record of the waste as presented in Fig. 5. A map to show the extent of arable cultivation in 1066 has not been included with this paper. Such a map could best be regarded as marking the climax in the agricultural achievement of Mercian Cheshire which was swept away by the Conquest and the events of 1069-70. The distribution of the ploughlands in 1086 is of much greater significance in the history of agriculture in Cheshire, as it marks the base line from which subsequent development and expansion has to be measured. Fig. 5 is ancillary to this insofar as it may be regarded as pointing the way forward into the future. In some respects it is a blueprint indicating variations in the degree of achievement that would be necessary to reach parity with the situation as it had been in 1066.

As noted earlier, recovery in East Cheshire was but slowly accomplished but in other parts of the county and especially in Wirral expansion went forward at a rapid pace.²³ Bearing in mind the extensive tracts of natural waste as typified by the forests of Mondrem and Mara and that amorphous and ill defined region known as 'le Frith', what stands out in 1086 is the great expanse of arable land in West and South Cheshire. Each of these wastes subsequently came under attack as is instanced at Budworth in le Frith, the later arable lands of which included selions lying in 'le Witefeuld', 'le Hallecroft', 'le Hethilewes', 'le Schepecroft' and 'le Dichefeuld'.²⁴ The ploughlands of South Cheshire at this time are deserving of notice in view of the commonly held belief, which lacks acceptable documentary proof, that Cheshire and in particular, South Cheshire was not an arable county. In respect of the medieval period this belief

21 Dorothy Sylvester, 'Cheshire in the Dark Ages', *T.H.S.L.C.*, vol. 114, 1962, pp.1-22.

22 Computation based on extraction from author's file on assarting for 1200-1300.

23 P.H.W. Booth, 'Farming for Profit in the Fourteenth Century: the Cheshire Estates of the Earldom of Chester', *J.C.A.S.*, vol. 62, 1979, p.78.

24 E.E. Barker, *Talbot Deeds 1200-1682*, *R.S.L.C.*, vol. 93, 1953, p.21.

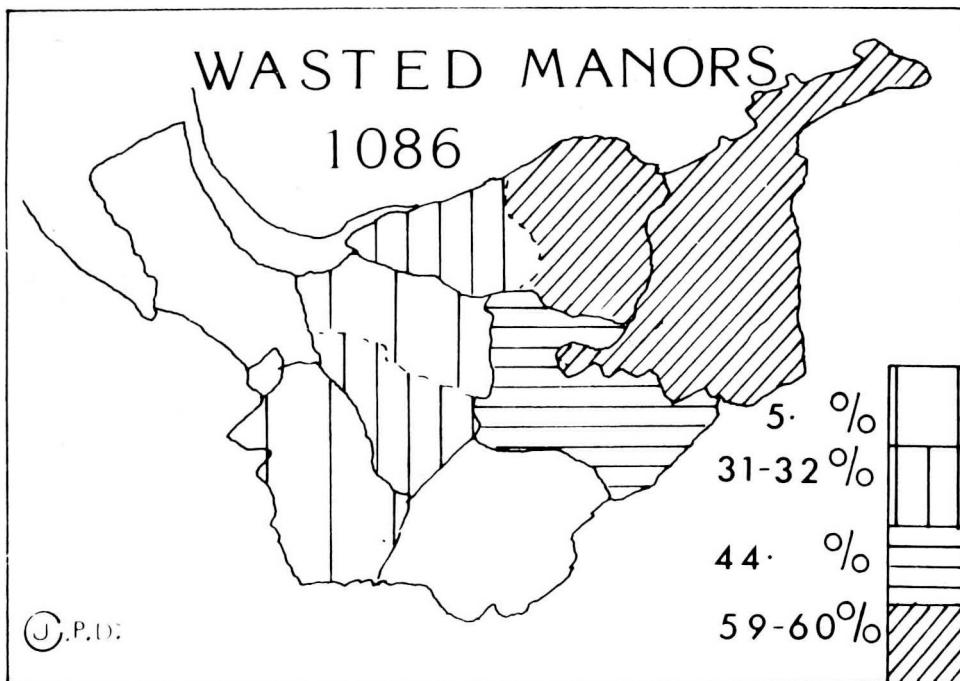


Fig. 5

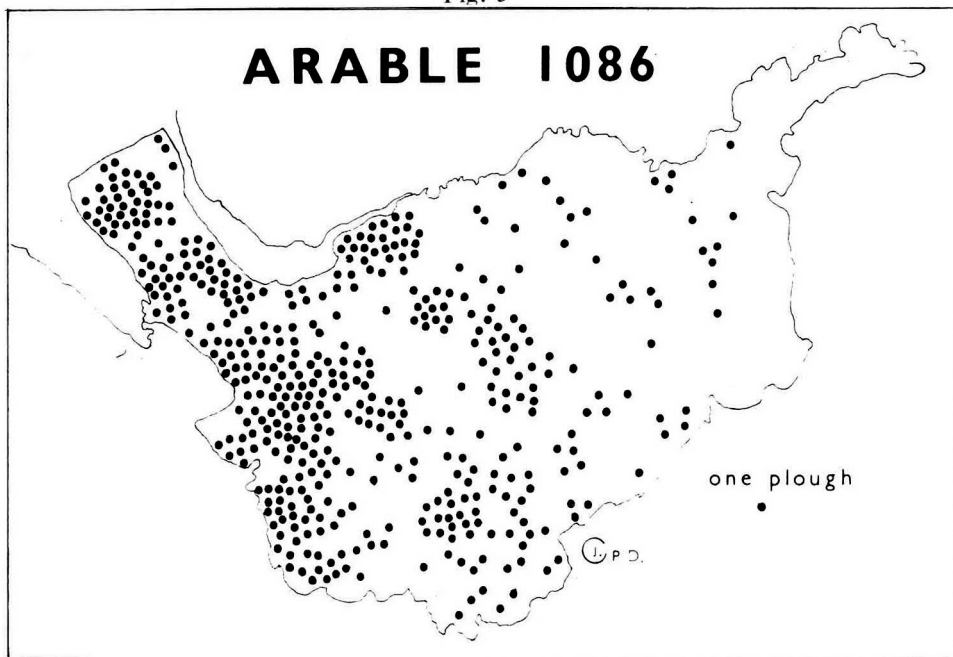


Fig. 6

has been rebutted by Mr. P.H.W. Booth²⁵ while for later times it is worthy of record that during the reign of Elizabeth I, corn represented one fifth of the total value of probate inventories in South Cheshire while the herds there contained fewer cows than in any other region of Cheshire.²⁶ Later still, in the 1840s, arable in South Cheshire accounted for between one in five and one in three acres of total area.²⁷

The view has been advanced that the events of 1066 to 1070 severely checked the process of agricultural expansion but this is to see only the tip of the iceberg. There was in addition a considerable strain placed on the whole agricultural structure as it emerged from the chaos of 1066. As is well known, the ownership of the land changed but the change carried with it very far reaching implications for Cheshire agriculture. Prior to the Conquest the land lay in the hands of the Mercian thanes and their tenants. The manorial lands provided for their support and they enjoyed the benefits from any surplus which might arise. Surpluses could be disposed of in the market and hides and skins, to take one example, could be purchased by local curriers, tanners, saddlers and collar makers and fashioned into artefacts which passed back into the local community to maintain local agriculture.

The very different power structure which replaced the local rule of the thanes following the Conquest, resulted in much of the return from local agriculture being channelled to provide support for the local feudal structure and of course the State through taxation. It is worth noting that both labour service and renders in kind represented a tax on agriculture, which ultimately, translated into cash revenue, contributed to the support of the foreign wars which attracted much of the attention of the Norman kings and their feudal tenants.²⁸ The point being made here is that that part of the product of local agriculture which formerly passed back into the system now went into the feudal economy. Although the manorial blacksmiths continued to make ironware their work received a different focus, there was less time to fashion sickles, scythes and spades because the local Norman lord required running repairs to the armour of his men at arms and stirrups, bits and spurs for his horses. In the Chamberlain's Accounts there is a hint of this 'for hauberks, crossbows made anew . . . and for mending of old hauberks . . .'.²⁹ It is true that this was armourer's work but on the small manors it would be the blacksmith who would be called in to do what he could.

The same point may be made in respect of leather artefacts: on the manors of William, son of Nigel; William Malbank; Osbern, son of Tezzo and other Cheshire lords there would be a constant need for replacement of saddles, girths, straps and for new work from the manorial leather craftsmen. This was an outlet for leather artefacts which did not exist in the same volume before 1066. The thanes obviously needed leather and the craftsmen for similar purposes but Dot, Wulfgeat and

²⁵ Booth, 'Farming for Profit', pp.75 ff.

²⁶ Unpublished research by the author on Cheshire probate inventories in the Cheshire Record Office, Duke Street, Chester.

²⁷ Unpublished map by the author based on extraction of the whole of the Tithe Schedules for Cheshire.

²⁸ P.H.W. Booth and J. Phillip Dodd, 'The Manor and Fields of Frodsham', in *Medieval Cheshire*, *T.H.S.L.C.*, vol. 128, 1979, p.50.

²⁹ R. Stewart-Brown, ed., *Accounts of the Chamberlains and other Officers of the County of Chester 1301-1360*, *R.S.L.C.*, vol. 59, 1910, p.11.

Leofnoth and the others had no need to have a large retinue of armed retainers to maintain law and order on their manors nor were they called upon to lead and equip fighting men and their mounts for overseas wars. The scale of this is illustrated by the feudal service demanded for the war in Wales in 1288. Hamon de Mascy had to supply five armed horses or ten unarmed horses, William de Venables was called upon for ten armed horses or twenty unarmed horses, Ralph de Vernon supplied six armed or twelve unarmed horses and so on down to the lesser tenants like Robert de Netherton, Richard de Stockport and John de Mottram each obliged to provide one unarmed horse.³⁰

These horses would carry their equipment of bridles, bits, girths and saddles, whether they went away armed or unarmed and for service overseas in particular, this represented a waste economy. Much of the equipment would not come back to Cheshire and that which did was not likely to be suitable for a second tour of duty. The significance of this for the present discussion is that the demand for leather must have been constantly increasing. No doubt this was beneficial in terms of promoting expansion of the leather trade in the county but underlying this is the fact that leather derives from cattle and to a lesser degree from horses. If there was a rising demand for leather then it follows that there was a complementary rise in demand for cattle. In short, the operation of the feudal system in this context carries the implication that there had to be a change in focus for Cheshire agriculture with crop production giving way to a system giving more emphasis to livestock. There are many matters arising from 1066 which have not been discussed in the present article: the problem raised by the paucity of mills listed in Domesday, the question arising from the harrying of Cheshire in 1069-70 such as the differential rate of recovery of the wasted arable lands and of course what happened to the population of the wasted manors: was it a ferocious blood-bath? I think not. These questions will have to wait upon some future article.

³⁰ R. Stewart-Brown, ed., *Calendar of County Court, City Court and Eyre Rolls of Chester 1259-1297*, Chetham Society, new series, vol. 84, 1925, pp.xlvii-xlix.

