

THE *HUMBRA* AND *QUABBA* OF HACKNEY AND LEYTON

BY BEATRICE A. LEES, M.A., F.R.HIST.S.

IN the *Inquisitio* or Survey of the Templars' lands in England which Geoffrey Fitz Stephen, Master of the Temple, ordered to be made in 1185, occurs the heading:

*Hee sunt consuetudines hominum fratrum templi de
humbra de elemosina domini Willelmi de Hasting'.¹*

The Hospitaller, John Stillingflete, writing in 1434, states that:

*Willielmus Hastings dedit Templariis pratum juxta
Hackney, vocatum Hastingmede.²*

These passages, separated in time by some two and a half centuries, can be shown to refer to the same donation, and the evidence which establishes this connexion also proves that the Templars' twelfth-century tenants, the *homines de humbra* of 1185, were settled in the low-lying meadows and marshland of Hackney and Low Leyton, in the valley of the river Lea.

The donation of William of Hastings, as recorded in the *Inquisitio*, comprised, in round numbers, about 110 acres of rented land, with a bog or *quabba*, held by four men for two shillings a year, and two acres of meadow in St. Mary hope, in Leyton.³ The customary services lay exclusively on the meadowland, and from them may be inferred the size of the local hide and virgate. Each tenant of five acres paid a money rent of 1s. 6d. (xviij, d.) and provided the labour of one man for the processes of the hay harvest, the yearly routine of haymaking: *ad pratum falcandum j. falcem et j. hominem ad leuandum, et j. ad parandum*. The tenant of ten acres

and the half-virgater paid 3s. in money, and provided twice as much labour in the hayfield as the five-acre man, and the solitary virgater owed a rent of 6s. with double the half-virgater's labour service. As the ten-acre tenant and the half-virgater are equal in rent and service, it may be assumed that the virgate contained 20 acres, which probably gives an 80-acre hide. The services were standardized, with some slight divergences, and fell on a group of about 16 men. The money rents, apart from the customary services, amounted to £1 17s. 3d. a year.

Immediately after the Hastings grant the *Inquisitio* of 1185 records the "alms" of *frater Ailbrith*, when he entered the Templars' Order. This second donation consisted of land of unspecified extent, held by *Robertus de Wic* for two marks, and of two half-virgate holdings, rented at 4s. each, with the same customary service as the half-virgaters on the Hastings land. Since the final clause in this section of the Survey charges the Templars with the obligation of feeding all the customary hay-makers during their term of service, it is clear that the two grants of land lay in the same district, and this is confirmed by a charter⁴ in which Richard of Hastings and the Chapter of the Temple in England concede and confirm to *Robertus de Wicha* the land which had belonged to brother Ailbrict, with the exception of the tenures of the Templars' men, Alfrich and Leswin, with four acres which William of Hastings had given, and two acres of meadow at Stratford le Bow. For this fief Robert paid the Temple a yearly rent of two marks of silver, with six trusses of straw.

The mention of St. Mary hope and of Stratford in these documents suggests that the *humbra* and *quabba* of the *Inquisitio* were situated in the same neighbourhood, the marshy flats that border the river Lea. That they are to be sought in Hackney and Leyton is rendered practically certain by the evidence of fourteenth-century extents, by the fact that the charter to *Robertus de*

Wicha figures in a "view" taken at Hackney in 1427-8, by Stillingflete's location of *Hastingmede* in Hackney, and by the long association of the Hackney and Leyton district with the two great Military Orders.

Richard of Hastings, the grantor of the charter to *Robertus de Wicha* or Wic, was the immediate predecessor of Geoffrey Fitz Stephen as Master of the Temple in England. He seems to have been a kinsman of William of Hastings, the Templars' benefactor, and though his charter must be dated after 1155, when he first appears as Master, the Hastings donation may well have been made some years earlier, while the Templars were still occupying the Old Temple in Holborn, before their removal to Fleet Street in 1161. The Holborn stables⁵ would be a convenient centre for the delivery of the supplies of hay and straw from the fertile water-meadows on the Lea, provided by the customary labour of the *homines de humbra*, supplies which were necessary for the maintenance of the many horses of the equestrian Knighthood, the *fratres milites*.⁶ The word *humbra*, the Latin *umbra*, shade or shadow, unusual in this context, is found in northern English dialect forms as *omber*, *oumber*, or *onmer*, in the sense of "a grassy slope by the side of a river, a swamp, wet land,"⁷ and in occasional river or place names. Its occurrence in a medieval Latin form in a twelfth-century Survey connected with London is of some philological importance. The *humbra*, or marshy meadowland is clearly distinguished from the actual bog, or *quabba*,⁸ another dialect form, which has survived in modern use in the compound *quabmire* or *quagmire*. The *Inquisitio* of 1185 was apparently compiled from rolls (*rotuli*) drawn up in the separate localities surveyed, sometimes by village juries, and in several instances words now obsolete, or only used locally, have been preserved in it. The *humbra* and *quabba* of Hackney and the *hope*⁹ of St. Mary hope, Leyton, are words of this kind, echoes from the common speech of the men of Middlesex and Essex in

the time of Henry II. As time went on, and the Templars' property increased in value and extent, the local descriptive terms *humbra* and *quabba* were merged in the general place names of *Hakeney* and *Leyghetone*, but the traditional labour services, the *consuetudines hominum de humbra*, persisted. By 1308 (1 Ed. II),¹⁰ at the time of the suppression of the Templars, they were drawing £6 1s. 8d. a year from tenements in Hackney, *tam de liberis tenentibus quam natinis*, and £5 18s. 4d. from 35½ acres of meadow, worth 3s. 4d. a year per acre, while the *opera natinorum*, the labour services of customary tenants who had to mow 12 acres of meadow yearly, were valued at 7s., or 7d. an acre. Pleas and perquisites of the court worth half a mark a year and a water-mill worth £1 6s. 8d. brought the annual Hackney revenue up to £14 os. 4d.¹¹ In Leyton the Templars held 4 acres of meadow at 3s. an acre *per annum*, 5 acres of pasture at 1s. (xij d.) an acre *per annum*, and a second water-mill worth £1 6s. 8d.¹² an additional revenue of £2 3s. 8d. a year. These two mills on the river Lea¹³ are described as close together and under the same roof, though one was in Hackney, in Middlesex, and the other in Leyton, in the county of Essex. There were probably two mill-wheels, with a common roof-shelter, an arrangement often found where local and jurisdictional boundaries were disregarded for the sake of practical convenience. In modern times the names Temple Mills and Temple Mills Bridge still preserve the memory of the Knights of the Temple, and of their successors, the Hospitallers, or Knights of St. John of Jerusalem.¹⁴

NOTES

1. P.R.O.: E. 164/16, fo. 6 vo.
2. *Monasticon Anglicanum*, VII (VI. ii), 832.
3. P.R.O.: E. 164/16, fo. 6, 6 vo.
4. MS., Cotton, Nero E. VI, fo. 67.
5. The *stabulum* at the Old Temple is mentioned in the deed of sale to the Templars, dated May, 1161.

6. The documentary material on which this article is based has now been published in Vol. IX of the *British Academy's Records of Social and Economic History. Records of the Templars in England in the Twelfth Century* etc., Beatrice A. Lees.

7. Wright, *Dial. Dict.*, s.v. Oumer. *New Eng. Dict.* s.v. UMBER.

8. *New Eng. Dict.* s.v. Quab.

9. *New Eng. Dict.* s.v. Hope, sb. This word (hóp) is used for enclosed fen or marsh, and also for an inlet, or small bay.

10. MS., Cotton Nero E. VI, fo. 66, 66 vo *De extenta terrarum et tenementorum que fuerunt Templariorum in Hackney.*

11. In 1338 the Hospitallers were in receipt of six marks (£4) a year from Hackney. Larking, *Knights Hospitallers in England*, Camden Soc., 1857, p. 95.

12. In the thirteenth century the Master of the Temple in England held a water-mill in Low Leyton, for which he had to make a bridge at his own cost, *ultra cursum stagni molendini . . . inter Ogeneye et Coppedethorn*, P.R.O: Assize Rolls, 323, 6-7 Ed. I m. 38 (39).

13. *Super aquam de leyghe.*

14. Lysons, *Environs of London* (1794), ii, 450 seq. Lewis, *Top. Dict. Eng.* (Hackney).