

BILSTHORPE AND CENTRAL NOTTS.

By T. H. COOK

DURING the latter half of the 9th century, eastern Mercia was divided among the members of a great Danish *here*. The origin of Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire date from this time. Indeed, our county seems to represent the district occupied by a definite division of this army, with its headquarters at Nottingham, itself developed and fortified as one of the Five Boroughs.

The character of life in the region was profoundly affected by the intensity of this Danish settlement and nowhere more so than in central Nottinghamshire. Bilsthorpe is a characteristic Danish settlement, a small hamlet developed by a community of free men, and a member of a soke which had its nucleus at Rufford, intended to dominate the older Anglian villages of the region. The Bildr who gave his name to the village was clearly a man of some importance under Guthrum, but it is evident from the Domesday record that one greater than he held Rufford as his property, and preserved the Anglian settlement as a source of rent and services. His name we do not know, but, by the close of Anglo-Danish times his powers had passed to Ulf the Seneschal, son of Suertebrand, one of the twelve hereditary lawmen of Lincoln. He was thus one of that small and select body who had the specialised legal knowledge to have his seat on the upper bench of the borough court of Lincoln. Ulf forfeited his lands after the conquest to Gilbert de Gaunt.

Geologically, a good deal of central Nottinghamshire is a region of waterstone and marl, not as open as the Bunter country to the west and yet not so densely forested as the Liassic clays stretching east to the Trent. The Greet valley gives a rough division into northern and southern sections. The southern portion nearer the Trent was more accessible and had been occupied since the Roman period. A Romano-Celtic civilisation had founded villages at Hexgreave, Camp Hill, Farnsfield, Coombs Farm and Southwell Burgage and had in turn been supplanted by Anglians during the age of

migration. By 958 this region was sufficiently well developed to form the basis of the Southwell grant by Oswy to the Archbishops of York.¹

North of the Greet, neither Celtic nor Anglian settlement had been so intensive. Spasmodically early place-names do occur, e.g. Winkerfield, Rufford, but the protuberant spurs of the Keuper series were freely occupied for the first time by the numbers of the Guthrum here. Bilsthorpe and Eakring so came into existence.

Bilsthorpe old village occupies the eastern and southern slopes of a Keuper spur which projects westwards to overlook the Bunter dip slopes towards Mansfield and Rufford. At the foot flowed a stream which first ran southwards but then turned west and north-west to join Rainworth Water (*olim* Idle) at Labour-in-Vain. As a defensive site the choice of position was admirable, the marshy land at the base being commanded by a 60 ft. rise of Keuper rocks terminating in a small plateau about 300 ft. above sea level. Approach from the north and west was rendered difficult by a dense belt of woodland flanked by marshy meadows, and, to the south the lower terrain of pond and marsh of Bilsthorpe moor was another natural obstacle. Not until the mediaeval period were the original defences augmented, in the case of the manor house, by two moats lying west and east of the site. These still remain to protect the Manor Farm which replaced Bildr's original stockaded thorp.

The dependent settlement of Bildr's followers lay on south-facing gentler slopes above a well-marked spring-line from which small streams flow north to Rainworth Water or west and south-west to Kirklington and the river Greet. The lower valleys so formed gave a marshy terrain well meriting the term "mor" or "kiarr". It was above the water-bursting that the earliest tofts and crofts so typical of the Danish sokeman were developed as well as the Clay field, one of the three mediaeval fields of the village.

The Village Boundaries

The western boundary of the village lies just east of that ancient route known locally as the Rufford road—the Storgate of Danish Nottinghamshire, as it was utilised by the Danes

¹Birch. *Cartularium Saxocicum*. 1029.

invading Mercia from York. The boundary follows a natural feature in the course of an ancient stream which once flowed north at the base of the Bunter-Pebble beds to join Rainworth Water near Red Bridge. The source of this rill was on the northern slope of Lockwell Hill in a spring which was fenced off for some reason unknown and thus gave the nearby hill its name of Lockhagh¹—the Lockoe Wells of the Ecclesiastical Commission report of 1630. The boundary fence was intact thirty years ago and the spring then flowed. However, the industrial demands of the colliery, which also supplies water to the colliery village, have very considerably lowered the water-table and the spring no longer runs to feed the valley, now a dry feature.

Beyond Red Bridge on the modern Rufford Road, the parish boundary turns north-westwards to Labour-in-Vain and the Eakring-Deerdale road. Such evidence as is available points to the fact that it follows the earliest original course of the Rufford road now existing as a series of bridle roads (*a*) Red Bridge and Labour-in-Vain and (*b*) crossing Mickledale Lane to Eakring Road. This is the "Kings highway" of the Forest perambulations, the "owde cawsey" of the Patent Rolls of 1453. Labour-in-Vain farm, which stands on the route, was an inn. A century ago its sign depicted a white woman engaged in the attempt to scrub a negro child white. The farm takes its name from the inn sign and not, as is stated in Vol. XVII of the English Place Name Society from the poor nature of the soil hereabouts.

Leaving the Bilsthorpe boundary this ancient road swung away north to Robin Dam Bridge on the Eakring-Deerdale road. The bridge derives its name from the large artificial dam which lay nearby and which was probably one of the stewponds created by the Abbot of Rufford on his lands—similar to that at Inkersall or Winkerfield which burst its banks in 1842. Robin Dam existed in the 17th century but was subsequently drained by the Saviles at a date unknown. The road then closely follows Rainworth Water, proceeding through the western end of Coult's Wood to pass by the rear of Rufford Abbey on its way to the ancient ford in the village. On this section of the road inside Rufford Park Peter de Stoke indulged in the practice of armed robbery, for which he was

¹See *Feet of Fines* 1196-1760, *sub anno* 1226.

arrested in 1311 on information provided by Ralph de Tutbury. Seventeenth century Rufford estate plans mark the course of the road very distinctly. It is probable that the alteration of course to the modern line also occurred in the latter half of the 17th century. In the county records of date 8th October 1658, Mr. John Lane, on behalf of Sir John Savile, owner of Rufford, sought permission of the justices to change the course of the highway leading from Ollerton to Nottingham via Rufford. He alleged that a diversion making traffic go "from Ollerton by the Broad Oake to Robin Dam and soe to Inkersall" would be more convenient as it lay higher on the Forest (avoiding the valley of Rainworth Water and incidentally giving privacy to the estate) "and would be a straiter and better way." An order was made to view "ye olde way and ye other way". The result is not recorded but it seems clear that the diversion was made.

The southern boundary of the parish coincides with the old turnpike which runs from Mansfield to Newark via Rainworth and Kirklington. Sveral authorities (Rooke, Dickinson, Stevenson) consider the line of it to be Roman and adduce the 40 acre Romano-Celtic village of Hill Close in Hexgreave, with its now famous pig of lead, in support of the theory. Fifty years ago the road was known to Bilsthorpe villagers as the Street, and the employment of this term is itself an indication of some age.

The eastern bounds are again marked by an ancient route (now a bridle road) which led from the York estate at Hexgreave, through Belle Eau Park, whose moated enclosure was held by York tenants, the Bella Aquas or Bellews, from early Plantagenet times, north-eastwards to another mediaeval road. This ran from Rufford Abbey via the North laithes (wool storage barns) to Eakring and through Pudding Poke Wood on to Hockerton, Roewood, Muskham, Kelham and Newark. In all these villages, the abbey held considerable parcels of land. It is a typical ridgeway, recalled from the oblivion into which it had fallen by the oil company exploiting the Eakring deposits. In 1317 it was also the scene of kidnap and robbery when two Rufford monks seized the person of Thomas de Holme between the abbey and Rohagh Grange (Roewood in Muskham parish) and held him until they received a ransom of £200.

From the road, the Bilsthorpe boundary turns west and follows the south edge of Eakring Brail Wood back to the village where it finally turns north along the course of a stream as far as the Eakring-Deerdale road. This, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries existed as a coach road making for Mansfield Woodhouse across Rufford Forest to Crown Farm.

The Mediaeval Village

Until 1778 the village remained little disturbed from the days of its original foundation and the Domesday record. The mediaeval site and land tenure is however difficult to recognise in view of the later changes, which include

- (a) the enclosures of Sir George Savile between 1778 and 1798, without parliamentary sanction.
- (b) those of Sir John Lumley Savile 1800-20 w.p.s.
- (c) the 20th century adjustments consisting of
 - (i) the sale of the greater part of the northern half of the parish to the Stanton Iron and Steel Company in 1922 and the consequent development of the colliery and the completely new village with its social/cultural complexes.
 - (ii) the final sale of the remaining Rufford Abbey estate in 1936.

The mediaeval picture is necessarily somewhat blurred but the survival of the tithe map and award of 1837 does enable a fairly accurate reconstruction to be made. In common with many Midland and Nottinghamshire villages, Bilsthorpe developed the characteristic three field system.

Church Lane (*olim* Cow Lane) led to the Manor house and the church from the Eakring-Farnsfield road. The church was in existence by the early 13th century (the rectorial list dates from 1221) and may have replaced an earlier preaching cross. The remnants of the shaft of this cross (dated to late Saxon times) can now be seen in the church itself. Significantly, at the bottom of the lane, was the pinfold, still existing, where stray animals were impounded to the lord's advantage, the fine varying from 2d. to 4d. At the tun-end and north of the spur were situated the smithy and the early rectory, the former surviving in the modern garage, the latter destroyed in the fire of 1726. It was replaced by a much more

opulent building opposite the church, the home of the present incumbent. Southwards along Farnsfield road towards the Moor were built the tofts and the appurtenant crofts of the sokeman. These in turn were succeeded by the first of the great fields ; the clay field, divided into its upper and nether furlongs and enclosing the well-drained soils above the spring line already noted. Towards Wycar Leys and the Kirklington Road, the land was lower-lying and, as such, the subject of later reclamation, when the work and methods of Dutch engineering introduced into Axholme became better known. In the mediaeval age the surviving place names point to pastoral uses. Wycar Leys Farm probably functioned as the lord's dairy farm (Wick-Kiarr).

West of the Manor and the Clay field the terrain was once extensively forested and Eakring Brail, Long Springs and Foxholes woods are merely surviving remnants. Here the early lords probably hunted the wild creatures of the chase away from the oppression of the forest laws and its regarders. Gradually reclamation mainly for pastoral uses (via Cow Lane to Pastures) took place but there were other uses as field names such as Barton Close and Pease Close suggest. But Broxborough and Foxholes indicate strongly the original employment.

The triangular area with its apex on Bilsthorpe Moor and its base along the Mansfield-Newark turnpike was named Hollin Hill and Hollin Plains respectively. This was a region of brushwood and open forest as the archaic Ingar's Holt testifies. Its sandy and unfertile nature prevented agricultural development until the age of 18th century enclosure. Here were two gravel pits abutting on the main road and Farnsfield road from Bilsthorpe. Their uses were plainly directed to the reparation of these roads—a task which was a communal enterprise under the authority of the village constable, at least since the reign of the first Elizabeth, although tardily and grudgingly done at the best, and often neglected. Possibly from this area too came the cartloads of bracken and heather (note Brackney Lane) which the villagers of Bilsthorpe were accustomed to sell on market days in Newark during the 13th century, according to Brown's *History of Newark*.

The south-western portions of the village lands were roughly rectangular in shape and abut on the Mansfield-Newark

turnpike with Farnsfield Lane and the Rufford Road, respectively, forming the other boundaries. From Forest Lane a stream flowed northwards to the foot of the Manor Hill before turning west and north-west to Labour-in-Vain. The lands adjoining the whole length of its course were devoted to common pasture and enjoyed by all inhabitants since the acreages here always remained free of tithe. However the rector obtained his share, for the section nearest the old rectory was in his hand and included within it was Parson's Pond—still marked on the 6" O.S. sheets (Edition of 1920) although it has now disappeared beneath the approach embankment north of the railway bridge which carries Eakring Road over the mineral line serving the colliery from Farnsfield.

On the western side of Farnsfield Lane lay the wooden tofts of the sokemen, each with its attendant croft varying somewhat in size but always approaching the four and a half acres which was a regular feature of these Danish settlements. By the period Bilsthorpe had reached its maximum development they seem to have been between fifteen and twenty in number and the most recent verged upon, but were not included within the small nucleation of houses called Bilsthorpe Moor. The moor was markedly different from the old village in that (a) houses consisted of two-roomed cottages without upper chambers in most cases or a variant—one up and one down (b) the building material was either brick or brick/plaster and not wood (c) they were without exception built on small enclosures of less than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre of the early common lands. The available evidence points to a post 17th century time of origin when the mushroom growth of population occurring not only in Nottinghamshire but throughout England generally had resulted in this form of development.

Between the moor and Forest Lane lay the bulk of the common lands. Their original area was very considerable but they have largely disappeared as the result of various enclosures and at present cover merely 200 sq. yds. of land; enough for a water pump and a right of way. In addition to their more normal uses, the modern field name of Brick Kiln Close points to another activity. The old quarry which existed south of Forest Lane was the source of the new material—the Keuper series—and the kiln or kilns lay on the north side of the lane. After the enclosures the work of brick-making was transferred

to the village and the clay quarry to the south west side of Brail Wood, where the modern brickworks merely continue the tradition, as the bulk of the houses in the new colliery village illustrates. Brick-making as a craft seems to have been important in central Nottinghamshire from the 18th century onwards and sites were established in Bilsthorpe, Eakring, Farnsfield, Halam and Edingley at one time or another. It points to a village life of self support and self-subsistence with little contact with major markets, as the trade extended to the manufacture of field drains, and coarse pottery too.

Forest Lane granted access to a wide belt of woodland which stretched from Ingar's Holt to Lockwell Hill ; finally cleared between 1780 and 1820 to form the New Fields. A further forested region ran northwards along the western boundary of the parish but succumbed earlier to the axe, where in the northern half the lands known as the old Brecks occur. Flowers and Rook Wood are plantations made by Sir John Lumley Savile to provide the hop-poles for that type of cultivation noted by Lowe—of which both Ollerton and Rufford were well-known centres. Towards Labour-in-Vain the land rose fairly steeply to the 282 ft. high elevation of Mickle Gable (an unusual field name in Notts.) and here the forest thinned to include the sand beds as well as the ancient forest enclosures already noted.

The remaining pasture lands and two of the three fields lay to the north of Church Hill (Cow Lane) extending north from the Tun End Closes and north-west and north-eastwards each side of Eakring Road. From Parson's Pond a lane, Stoney Field Lane, branched off to Labour-in-Vain and the Rufford Road. Along it lay the second of the fields, Stoney Field. Lying as it did on the Bunter series it cannot have been highly productive. Even today strong winds, especially those from a westerly direction sweep the surface to give the impression of a minor sand storm when the fields are ploughed and sown. The field, as it was, is now completely concealed under the bricks and mortar of the colliery village and the schools.

The Mickledale (Mickledale Lane) was pastoral in its application. Extending north towards Robin Dam, it gave admirable pasture for the sheep to which the Cistercian community at Rufford looked for augmentation of its income drawn from two laithes or sheep granges—one in the village,

whose precise whereabouts remains unknown, and the other at Inkersall.

On the other side of the Eakring Road, a little north and west of Mickledale was the North Field, approached by North Field Lane, and, like the Clay Field, divided into its upper and nether furlongs. The bulk of it has disappeared entirely under the surface buildings of the colliery, the lane itself being utilised as an approach to the pit. Similarly, Crow Parks, the Snape (= marsh) and the Duck ponds, which imply an ill-drained region of varying fertility mainly devoted to pastoral uses and the trapping of wild fowl, are now occupied by the sidings and yards feeding the colliery from the Farnsfield-Ollerton mineral line.

The final remnant of the village lands occurred north and east of this North Field. The Birken hedges, which included the Pingle, lay to the north and in mediaeval times would be akin in vegetation cover to the Birkwoods in Ollerton and accordingly devoted to the feeding of swine or similar pastoral uses before enclosure. Access to water was provided by a stream rising here and flowing east-wards to Eakring. The New Meadows of the tithe map, along the eastern parish boundaries are obviously recent enclosure. In the remote N.E. corner of the parish were the White Lands. Since the soil is the characteristic red of the Keuper Series the name can only apply to the crop produced i.e. wheat. "Wheat" and "White" both ultimately derive from a common Anglo-Saxon root, and in central Notts. wheat was often termed white corn in opposition to the black corn which was rye e.g. at Laxton and Eakring. Here again we have an example of new enclosure of late 18th century or early 19th century date. The colliery spoil heaps have now claimed the whole of this area.

The Enclosures

Lowe is the authority for stating that enclosure at Bilsthorpe was largely due to the efforts of Sir George and Sir John Lumley Savile respectively. This does not imply that such work had not been undertaken in earlier times. Forest enclosure, where any area between 40 and 400 acres was periodically cropped and abandoned (subject always to the free entry of the deer) was commonly practised among the Forest villages and Bilsthorpe was no exception. We have

also seen that squatters were taking over permanently sections of the common lands from the 17th century onwards. But the impact of improved methods of mapping and survey, and the introduction of Dutch engineering to land reclamation (both in the 17th century) together with the spread of the ideas germinated by what is loosely termed the agricultural revolution in the 18th century and their adoption and application by landowners with an eye to supra-marginal rents, all hastened the process. Moreover, the remoteness of an entailed estate like Rufford, together with the series of wars culminating in the Napoleonic struggles, allied to the disastrous famine years of crop failures which occurred periodically up to 1820 and even beyond, would speed it. The Saviles were quick to appreciate the financial advantages of high prices for agricultural produce and rightly, as it turned out, anticipated no concerted opposition to their schemes for enclosure.

Until full access is attained to the Rufford estate documents recently purchased by the county authorities, the precise steps of enclosure are impossible to ascertain but possible lines of procedure can be suggested.

Stage A The enclosure of the Clay Field and some 200 acres of common land by Sir George Savile some date after 1778, as noted by Lowe. This brought the most fertile lands of the village under intensive cultivation. [as Lowe observed.]

Stage B The enclosure of the poorer sand soils of the Stoney and North Fields. This may be attributed to Sir John Lumley Savile since it would be in his time (1800-20) that the implications behind the Norfolk Four Course Rotation and the correlation of root crop with sheep would be fully appreciated.

Stage C The clearance of the remnants of forest lands, brushwood and waste ; the creation of a New Field from scratch, and the replanting of timber during the period when there was a growing demand for grain for fermenting, and hops, was again probably the work of Sir John.

No dates can safely be given for the drainage of the heavier clays and the creation of enlarged areas for pasture and wheat lands but they almost certainly were developed over the 40 years between 1780 and 1820 in response to economic conditions.

The extent to which dispossession resulted can merely be surmised. The plain facts obtainable from the tithe award (1837-42) are that the six largest landholders and Rufford tenants in the village obtained the bulk of the land in tenancy. Six cases occur also of smaller men who received minor parcels of 20 acres or less. The rector obtained a very considerable parcel in lieu of tithe. The fact that all these holdings except the last were distributed until 1922 throughout the original three fields points to an amalgamation of strips scattered about these fields, with the addition of others obtained from the descendants of the mediaeval socmen. The holdings of the Manor Farm especially encourage the belief that in the middle ages the lord worked his lands in cultura side by side with the socmen—a practice noted at Eakring by Professor Stenton. The New Field was laid out systematically in closes of 10 to 20 acres and there is no sign here of compensating land grants. The flimsy evidence adducible hints always that the erst-while lease or copy-holder, unlike his ancestor, the socman, was unable to enforce his claims, and sank to the level of the farm labourer or perhaps moved away to the developing industries of the county town.