

# THE ORIGINS OF STONY STRATFORD

R. H. BRITNELL

The early history of Stony Stratford has recently been the object of several new observations: it has even figured in a professional inaugural lecture.<sup>1</sup> Professor Beresford has taken the history of the town back to at least 1202: he quotes from that year a reference to buildings at Stony Stratford, and supposed the existence there of 'an earlier market, the date of which is unknown.'<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of this date would be useful, since without a market an essentially urban, roadside community like Stony Stratford could not flourish. It is especially pleasing, therefore, to be able to offer evidence of not only one market charter but three, dating from the years 1194, 1199 and 1200, which have so far been unidentified only because Stratford is such a relatively common name.

In the sixteenth-century collection of transcripts of medieval charters known as Sir Christopher Hatton's *Book of Seals* there is copied the text of the letters patent whereby on 20 January 1199 Richard I granted a market at "Strafford" to Gilbert Bassett and Egelina his wife. It was not, however, the first such grant: it merely repeated the tenor of an earlier charter issued at Portsmouth on 30 April 1194. The king's first seal, with which the first charter has been authenticated, had fallen into enemy hands when the king was captured in Germany, and Gilbert and Egelina wanted the greater security of a charter under a new seal.<sup>3</sup> The same anxiety for a secure licence is shown by their having taken out yet another charter, dated 21 March 1200, from King John, shortly after his accession to the throne.<sup>4</sup>

Gilbert Bassett and Egelina, daughter of Reginald de Curtenay, must on the evidence of this charter, have married sometime before 1194.<sup>5</sup> But this was not Egelina's first marriage, for she had earlier been married to Walter II de Bolbec, lord of the barony of Whitchurch, Buckinghamshire, who died in 1190.<sup>6</sup> This earlier marriage gives the clue for the identification of the "Strafford" of the charters with Stony Stratford. Stony Stratford to the west of Watling Street was part of the manor of Calverton, and Calverton, having been among the lands of Hugh de Bolbec in 1086, followed the descent of the barony of Whitworth.<sup>7</sup> It will have belonged to Walter II de Bolbec at the time of his marriage to Egelina, and could have been given to her in dower.

1. A.M. Everitt: *New Avenue in English Local History*: an inaugural lecture delivered in the University of Leicester, Leicester, 1970, p.12.

2. M. Beresford: *New Towns of the Middle Ages*, London, 1967, p.398.

3. *Sir Christopher Hatton's Book of Seals*, ed. L.C. Lloyd and D.M. Stenton, Oxford, 1950, no 295, p.203.

4. *Rotuli Chartarum* (Record Commission, 1837), p.39.

5. The marriage must have taken place soon after 1190. Gilbert and Egelina had a son who died at the age of about fifteen during his parents' lifetime (*Curia Regis Rolls*, XIII, no. 2517, p.534. Egelina's parentage is also established here).

6. I.J. Sanders: *English Baronies: a study of their origin and descent, 1086-1327* Oxford, 1960, p.98.

7. *Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire*, IV, p.308-9, III, p.444.

The fact that "Strafford" belonged to Egelina in her own right may be deduced from her inclusion in the market charter. We can also check from what we know of Gilbert's estates. Following his death in 1205<sup>8</sup> there was a dispute in 1208 about how much land Egelina should hold in dower of the estate of her late husband. Gilbert had lands, according to a list then prepared, in Ardington and Wallingford in Berkshire, Holmer in Buckinghamshire, Colham in Middlesex, and North Stoke, Bicester and Salford in Oxfordshire.<sup>9</sup> This last manor, which had belonged to his mother, he had received only in 1200.<sup>10</sup> Amongst the rest there is nothing corresponding to the "Strafford" of the charters. This must mean that Gilbert and Egelina held "Strafford" in Egelina's right, which would be consistent with it being dower land from a former marriage.

This evidence does not imply that we can confidently take 1194 as a date for the founding of Stony Stratford. Mr. Elvey, in his edition of Luffield Priory charters, suggests that the origins of a trading community here should be taken back to the earlier twelfth century, citing the evidence of rents in Calverton which Walter I de Bolbec gave to the Templars.<sup>11</sup> This grant is known from a charter of Hugh II de Bolbec from c. 1142-64 whereby he confirmed his father's gift. This charter, if it bore the interpretation which Mr. Elvey gives it, would certainly reduce the importance of the market charters of 1194, 1199 and 1200 for the early development of Stony Stratford.

If I venture to disagree with Mr. Elvey at this point, it is with the reservations that the facts are very unclear, and that no very great certainty one way or the other seems possible at the moment. It is not at all sure that the rents listed in Hugh de Bolbec's charter, and again in the Inquest of Templars' lands of 1185, can be taken as evidence of a trading community, and even less clear that they represent a separate community. The rents listed seem much too large for ordinary market plots: five are as high as 6s. Both in the charter and in the Inquest they are described as in Calverton, and the fact that they were later considered to belong to Stony Stratford is established only by a page heading added to the thirteenth-century cartulary in which the text of Hugh's charter is preserved.<sup>12</sup> It would be surprising if rents in a new, distinct trading settlement should continue to have been described as in Calverton over a period of perhaps fifty years.

On the other hand the existence of planned settlement at Stony Stratford is attested from the time of Hamo son of Meinfein, lord of Wolverton, who died in 1184-5. We know of three standard plots. One, given by Hamo to the Templars, is described as an acre of land with a messuage, and is listed in the Inquest of the Templars' Lands of 1185 as a rent of 12d. in "Streford".<sup>13</sup> A second is identical, comprising an acre of land with a messuage in "Stratfordia" rendering 12d. rent,

8. He was apparently alive on 29 April 1205 *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum*, I, 29b but the king was taking command of his properties for the payment of debts by 1 January 1206 (*Ibid.* I, 61, 67, 67b).

9. *Curia Regis Rolls*, V, pp.235-6.

10. *Rotuli Chartarum* 41b. See W. Farrer: *Honors and Knights' Fees*, London, 1923-25, III, p.38-39.

11. *Luffield Priory Charters* ed. G.R. Elvey (Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire Record Societies, 1968, 1975), II, pp.1xx, 1xxi.

12. *Records of the Templars in England in the Twelfth Century*, ed. B.A. Lees (British Academy, Records of Social Economic History, IX), Oxford, 1935, pp.46, 197-8.

13. *Ibid.*, pp.46, 198.

previously held by Berner the smith, which Hamo granted to Aldith, wife of Osbert the king's forester: she, in turn gave it to Luffield Priory.<sup>14</sup> The third, a plot adjoining that of the Templars, was half the size of the first two, comprising half an acre of land and a messuage and owing 6d. rent. It too was held by Aldith, who gave it to Luffield Priory.<sup>15</sup> Town building on the Wolverton side apparently began over ten years before the earliest market charter granted to the lord of Calverton.

The market charters of 1194, 1199, and 1200 do not, therefore tell the beginning of the story. It is unlikely that Hamo would found free plots at Stony Stratford without developing a market there, and it is unlikely that he would found a market on so important a highway without royal permission to do so. There is still, probably, "an earlier market, date of which is unknown".

The evidence suggests therefore that even if there was some settlement on the future site of Stony Stratford in the earlier twelfth century, no distinct new town had yet been founded. Stratford as a place name occurs in the 1180s in association with plots on the Wolverton side of Watling Street, and this probably denotes the period when planned settlement began. Probably a market was founded then by the lord of Wolverton. The development of the Calverton side, recorded from 1202, had probably been proceeding for some years before this; the market charter granted to Gilbert Basset and Egelina in 1194 suggests that in that year the lord of Calverton was already interested in the potential of the site.

Stony Stratford, like the better-known example of Stratford-upon-Avon,<sup>16</sup> illustrates a characteristic of twelfth-century history which is of considerable interest for our understanding of the age. Roads which, for want of a long-distance trading of sufficient frequency, had been practically uninhabited for long stretches even in the heart of England, were being colonised by the enterprise of landlords whose manors impinged upon them. This colonisation of the main roads has received less attention from historians than the clearing of wastelands and the draining of marshes in the same period. Yet it deserves recognition as part of the same process of population growth and economic expansion.

14. *Luffield Priory Charters*, II, Nos. 757, 758, pp. 39, 400 (cf. no. 759, p. 400).

15. *Ibid.*, II, no. 756, p. 399. The house of Simon son of Leofric, was the Templars' rent there (*Records of the Templars*, p. 46).

16. E. M. Carus-Wilson: 'The First Half-Century of the Borough of Stratford-upon-Avon', *Economic History Review* (1965), 2nd series, XVIII, pp. 46-63.