

# The Saxon Charters of Brightwell, Sotwell and Mackney, Berks.

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I. Grant by King Eadred, in 945, of 30 hides, namely 10 at Beorhtanwille, 15 at Suttanwille, and 5 in Maccanig, with 46 acres of land adjoining Welingaford (*Brit. Mus. Add. MS.* 15,350, f. 46; in Birch, *Cart. Sax.*, III. 567, and Kemble, *Cod. Diplom.*, V. 301).

II. Grant by King Eadred, in 948, of 10 hides, namely 5 at Maccanie and 5 at Suttunwylle, with 46 acres of land adjoining Welingaford (*Brit. Mus. Add. MS.* 15,350, f. 54; in Birch, *Cart. Sax.*, III. 5, and Kemble, *Cod. Diplom.* V. 315).

III. Grant by King Eadwig, in 957, of 15 hides at Stottanwille (*Liber de Hyda*, Rolls Series, p. 170; Birch, *Cart. Sax.* III. 183).

The parishes of Brightwell and Sotwell stretch from the Thames on the north to the Moreton brook on the south, and are bounded on the east by Wallingford with the Liberty of Clapcot, and on the west by the parishes of Little Wittenham and North Moreton. The two villages, with the hamlets of Mackney and Slade End in the parish of Brightwell, are clustered together about the middle of the area; and this area may be roughly divided into four quarters, of which the north-western is Brightwell proper, the south-western is Mackney, the north-eastern is Sotwell, and the south-eastern is Slade End; but the parish of Sotwell cuts entirely across, having a narrow strip which passes southward between Mackney and Slade End, severing the latter hamlet from the other parts of Brightwell parish. A description of this complicated arrangement of the parishes will serve to make the meaning of the above-named charters more intelligible. Further, it should be added that the northern parts of the two parishes rise to a height of upwards of three hundred feet between the villages and the river; and Slade End is the end of the slad or valley under the hill-side. The villages of Brightwell, Sotwell and Slade End lie in a continuous line, and a series of brooks and ditches intervenes between them and Mackney. The Mackney lands again rise to a considerable height between these brooks and the larger Moreton brook which bounds the parishes on the south. We shall find that the charters regard Brightwell and Sotwell as one town or village (*villa* or *villula* in Latin, *porte* in Saxon). Slade End is not mentioned, being merely part of the same village and

perhaps a later outgrowth. But Mackney appears as distinct from the rest and an island, Maccanige or Maccanie, Macca's isle, perhaps named from a previous owner. The names of Brightwell and Sotwell will demand notice hereafter.

Each of the three charters before us purports to grant the lands named in it to the thegn Æthelgeard, and the third is followed by a grant of Æthelgeard bestowing the reversion upon the New Minster, or Hyde Abbey, at Winchester, after the days of himself and his wife.\* In *Testa de Nevill* the name of the donor appears as Wulward.† But before examining these grants it may be useful to add a few notes of the subsequent history. From Domesday Book we learn that Brightwell (there called *Bristowelle* and *Bricstewelle*, probably by a scribe's error, for Matthew Paris calls it *Bretewelle*§ and it next appears as *Brictewell*||) was held by the Bishop of Winchester, as Bishop Stigand had held it in King Edward's time. Stigand was translated from Elmham to Winchester in 1047 and from thence to Canterbury in 1052.¶ Brightwell therefore had passed at that date from Hyde Abbey to the bishopric, from the New to the Old Minster. Mackney is not mentioned in Domesday, being doubtless included in Brightwell, for in the time of Henry III. it belonged to the Bishop of Winchester, of whom it was held by Ralph de Mackney.<sup>1</sup> It had ceased to belong to the bishopric before the beginning of the 16th century, when it was held by Robert Court who died in 1509.<sup>2</sup> But Brightwell continued to be held by the Bishop in demesne until it was taken over in recent times by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Sotwell at the Domesday Survey still belonged to Hyde Abbey, being held of it by Hugh de Port, as also afterwards in the earlier part of Henry the Third's reign by Geoffrey de Mandevill.<sup>3</sup> But some time before 1277 it had ceased to belong to the Abbey; for in that year it was the property of Sir John de St. John, who granted it to Nicholas Fulberti, a merchant of Florence, and his wife, for life, at a yearly rent of one penny.<sup>4</sup>

\* *Liber de Hyda*, p. 173.

† *Testa de Nevill*, p. 125.

§ *Chronica Majora* (Rolls Series), II. 191.

|| *Testa de Nevill*, p. 125.

¶ Stubbs, *Registrum Sacrum* (1858), p. 19.

<sup>1</sup> *Testa de Nevill*, pp. 110, 123.

<sup>2</sup> Leland, *Itinerary*, II., 12; Lysons, *Magna Brit.*, I. 250.

<sup>3</sup> *Testa de Nevill*, pp. 110, 123, 126.

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 5 Edw. I., p. 211.

The first and second of these charters are contained in a chartulary compiled late in the twelfth century. The first is dated 945. But (says Mr. Birch) "King Eadmund died 26th May, A.D. 946," and therefore "it is difficult to account for a charter of Eadred his successor in A.D. 945, unless that name has been substituted for the former."§ We shall find reason to think it more probable that the charter was compiled at a later date. The second charter, dated 948, grants the land "all as Bishop Æthelwold had it before." But Æthelwold held the See of Winchester from 963 to 984||; whence it appears that the charter must have been drawn up some forty years or more after the date that it bears. Moreover, in both these charters the same persons, twenty-eight in all, append their signatures as witnesses after that of the King. These are Queen Eadgyfu, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishops of London and Winchester and five others, six ealdormen (*duces*) and twelve thegns (*ministri*). It is obviously impossible that this same group of persons can have been assembled on both occasions with an interval of two years. On the other hand, if we examine the signatures of the archbishops and bishops, which are most readily tested, we find that all of them were holding their Sees in both the years in which the charters are dated. Thus we have good evidence that one or the other of these charters is genuine in the main; for a mere forger could hardly have succeeded in compiling this array of signatures correctly; while at the same time we have proof that both have been tampered with, and a strong presumption that one or the other is spurious. Yet ancient forgeries such as this are often of considerable value and interest as shewing how the lands described in them were bounded at the time that they were written.

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of the third charter, in which King Eadwig in 957 grants to Æthelgeard fifteen hides in Stottanwille. It is preserved in the *Liber de Hyda*, the chronicle of Hyde Abbey at Winchester, compiled in the latter half of the fourteenth century. An examination of the boundaries defined in the charter will show that they embrace about half of the lands which now compose the two parishes of Brightwell and Sotwell, though it only names the latter place. The portions not included in it are (1) a triangular portion of Brightwell parish projecting westward between Little Wittenham and North Moreton; (2) the eastern and southern portions of Slade End; (3) the narrow southern strip of

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§ *Cart. Sax.*, III., 567, note.

|| Stubbs, *Registrum Sacrum*, p. 16.

Sotwell which has been described ; and (4) the south-eastern half of Mackney.

Then we may venture to infer from these three documents the following facts.

The Abbey possessed a charter of King Eadwig, in 957, granting to Æthelgeard these lands which he bequeathed to it afterwards. But Eadwig's grant was in part merely the confirmation of a grant made by his predecessor, Eadred, in 948 ; and a fragmentary record of this previous grant, with the names of the attesting witnesses, was embodied in the form of a charter compiled some time before the close of the twelfth century, in which the compiler, among other errors, introduced the name of the famous bishop Ethelwold, forgetting that he only became bishop fifteen years later, and forgetting also that the grant was to the New Minster and not to the bishopric. And again another industrious monk, wishing to record the boundaries of the thirty hides possessed here by the abbey in his day, and finding the names of King Eadred and the thegn Æthelgeard connected with the original gift, drew up an imaginary charter in which he made Eadred the donor of the whole, copied upon it the names of the witnesses of 948, and dated it, by a blunder, the year before Eadred's accession, 945.

It will be convenient, therefore, to examine first the boundary described in the charter of 957, which may be reasonably supposed to be genuine. The compiler of the Chronicle gives us, together with the original Saxon, versions of it in Middle English and in Latin. The boundary begins and ends at Mackney Ford ; the Thames is the northern base ; and a certain "street" is the connecting line between them, evidently (as we shall find) on the western side of the lands that are described. Such a street, between the Thames and a ford at Mackney, must be the Roman road from Dorchester to Streatley, part of the great highway that branched off from the Akeman Street at Aldchester, near Bicester, and passed along the middle of what is now Oxfordshire, crossing Otmoor and curving round the foot of Shotover Hill. In the other charters we find the same boundary defined as "the stream Gybhild" ; and accordingly we have a tributary of the Moreton brook called Kibble Ditch, and in documents of the sixteenth century Gibble or Gebyll Diche, forming the western boundary of Mackney now. Another tributary ditch, draining the western slope of Cholsey hill, enters the brook on the other side, immediately before the outflow of Kibble Ditch. Just below the junction of these three brooks would be the natural place

for the ford. A large part of this "street" can still be seen. Starting just above the point where it crossed the river, a broad grass track runs beside the ditch which skirts the edge of Wittenham wood. When the ditch ends, the cart-track continues up the hill-front, banked up steeply from the west so that while it is level with the fields on the other side it is raised to a considerable height—as much as ten feet or more in one part—on the west side; thus showing proof of ancient construction, for there is nothing in the character of the ground to account for it. Then across the ridge of the hill the track is protected on the west by a low bank and hedge. Thus far it has followed the boundary of Brightwell parish for three quarters of a mile, but now the boundary diverges westward and the track disappears. It must have passed almost alongside a remarkable track of still greater antiquity which comes down from the fortress of Sinodun and is hollowed deeply in the hill-front; for the abrupt declivity shows that the Roman road cannot have descended into this. Its course would naturally continue by the site where are now the buildings of Redgate Farm—a significant name—and here it would cross the other ancient road, which is still the highway from east to west. Owing to the extension of the parish westward at a later date, the "street" ceased to have any value as a boundary, and therefore it has been entirely ploughed away. But when we have followed its presumed course for nearly three-quarters of a mile across these Brightwell fields to the point where the southward line of the parish boundary is resumed, there a hundred yards or more of the bank and ditch reappear. Then crossing the Brightwell and Moreton road, and passing at the back of Moor End cottage, we are on a cart track which soon loses itself in the meadows, but the ditch beside it marks our course. It is, in fact, the upper part of Kibble Ditch. When it reaches the Mackney fields it has a broad grass track along its eastern side, bordered by a shallower ditch which separates it from the arable land. Thus the street of the charter is very clearly identified. This southern end is used as a cart-track, leading into marshy meadows, the lowest portion of which is known as Tadsey, presumably Toad's Island. At the extremity of this meadow, where the brooks have met, is a foot-bridge called Tadsey-bridge, by which a footpath from Mackney passes over the north-eastern slope of Cholsey hill, thus carrying on the direct line of the "street" which we have been following, and then emerging into the high road which leads on through Cholsey in the direction of Stratley. At Tadsey-bridge, therefore, we place Mackney Ford.

*(To be continued.)*