

MONKS RISBOROUGH: NEW LIGHT FROM ISLINGTON

A. H. J. BAINES

As the draftsmen of the Monk's Risborough charter¹ remarked in 903, things which happen in this world are sooner or later lost to the memory of mortal man unless they are recorded in documents. He could have added that these in their turn are mostly destroyed or forgotten, but all is not lost while the records themselves survive.

A century ago it appeared that the corpus of surviving Anglo-Saxon charters was so nearly complete that historians must thereafter concentrate on collation and commentary, and topographers on elucidation of boundary clauses, that incomparable record of the countryside as seen by those beating the bounds a thousand years ago. J. M. Kemble's belief that further treasures could be expected in unexplored repositories² seemed to have been negated by his own diligence and serendipity; but in fact some of the collections retrieved by antiquaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the wreck of the Dissolution continued to gather dust in academic libraries and country houses. The greatest such collection, that of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631) and his son Sir Thomas (1594–1662) was itself severely damaged by fire in 1731.

Then in 1939 Dr Marion Gibbs, who had unearthed the papers of Richard James (1592–1638) in the Bodleian Library,³ published the brief extracts which James had made from the charter roll of St Paul's Cathedral,⁴ which had been listed in a fifteenth-century catalogue but is now lost. "At one stroke understanding of the pre-conquest history of the see of London was transformed".⁶

In the same year a collection of the papers of John Selden (1584–1654), which had been left to

his executor, the great judge and historian Sir Matthew Hale (1609–1676) came to light in an out-house at Alderley, the Hale family seat in Gloucestershire.⁷ These papers, for whose survival we can perhaps thank Hale's clerk and executor, Robert Gibbon, were sold and dispersed. Many of them were returned to the appropriate cathedral archives, or were bought for American Universities, though one bundle, said to include 'cases of Anglo-Saxon laws' has not been heard of since 1948.

It was still not realised that Selden's full transcripts of some of the charters noted by James were among Hale's own papers in the library of Lincoln's Inn.⁸ They had been catalogued in 1838, and were accessible to scholars thereafter, but Kemble overlooked them! and although Selden was so highly regarded as a legal historian (his *Analecton Anglo-Britannicum* (1615) was a pioneer work on the civil government of Britain before 1066) no one seems to have referred to his transcripts until Dr Simon Keynes and Dr Susan Kelly realised their importance. In 1992 Dr Kelly published two charters of Æthelbold, King of Mercia 716–757, granting trading privileges to the bishop of London.⁹ In October 1993 Dr Keynes published an equally interesting text, closely related to the Monk's Risborough charter: a confirmation dated 903 of the title to ten hides at Islington which had been granted by Cenwulf, King of Mercia 796–821, to Beornnoth, his faithful comes.¹⁰ Although Beornnoth was a benefactor of the Church, Islington had remained in lay hands, and the landbook descended with the land to ealdorman Æthelfrith, until it was lost in a devastating fire which consumed all his *haereditarii libri*. Thereupon he petitioned King Edward the Elder and the joint rulers of

the Mereians, Æthelred and his wife Æthelflaed, Edward's sister, for permission to rewrite these charters for himself. The Mercian Witan resolved unanimously that charters should be written for him in the same terms as before. If he could not remember these terms, of which there was no central record, replacement charters were to be written, reciting the main features of the old grants and safeguarding his title; these instruments would not themselves confer fiscal privileges, but would be enough to confirm his powers of disposition and his direct ownership of what we may call his seigneurial demesne.

Two of these confirmations had been published by Kemble, those for Wrington in Somerset and for Monk's Risborough. Now we have a third, for Islington (Middlesex). The original Risborough charter¹¹ passed with the estate to Christ Church, Canterbury, and is now in the British Library.¹² The Wrington charter¹³ is known from the Great Cartulary of Glastonbury (mid fifteenth century),¹⁴ preserved at Longleat. The operative section has clearly been recast, but the preceding recitals agree almost literally with the Risborough text. James had copied only the preamble of the Islington charter, which does not identify the estate, so that Sawyer¹⁵ listed this extract as a variant text for Wrington (why not for Risborough?). Most Anglo-Saxon charters have been lost, and these three diplomas are presumably survivors of a much larger number written for Æthelfrith at the same time to replace his burnt landbooks.

We are not wholly without means of assessing the chance of survival of royal charters. There are 29 places called Buckland, from *bōc-land* in the sense of 'estate created by charter'.¹⁶ Each of these must have had at least one *bōc*, but only for four of them has any text survived (all in cartulary copies).¹⁷ Besides the 29, there are 8 other Bucklands evidenced from the twelfth to the fourteenth century which seem to be of Anglo-Saxon rather than of later 'manorial' origin (The later the place name, the greater the likelihood that it was transferred from a holder to his property).¹⁸ This suggests a probability of survival, mostly in later copies, of the order of one in eight, though the Bucklands with their artificial origin, may not be wholly typical in this respect.

If the scribe of Æthelfrith's confirmation charters became tired of copying an exemplar, he may have relieved the tedium by varying the Latinity without changing the sense. In the Islington charter the variations are hardly improvements. In the first line he wrote *patri* for *patris*, a slip that James and Selden faithfully refrained from correcting. *Terrena* replaces *terrestria*; *-que* is preferred to *et*; *delapsa deveniunt* is expanded to *delapsa in oblivionem devenire*, and there are a few seemingly pointless changes in word-order. The original grantor is named as *Cronolfus*, probably a misreading (hardly by Selden) for *Ceonulfus*, itself a bad form of *Coenulfus*. This was the Coenwulf who ravaged Dyfed¹⁹, pillaged and annexed Kent and deprived its king of his eyes and hands.²⁰ Yet Florence of Worcester calls him Sanctus Kenulfus. He failed to have the seat of the archdiocese moved from Canterbury to London. The Islington evidence calls for only two amendments to the Monk's Risborough text as edited in *Records of Bucks*.²² In line 12 it supports *valuisset*, not *voluisset*; the translation is therefore "no one should have the power to afflict him", rather than "no one should be disposed to afflict him". In the Islington witness list, Keynes²³ is prepared to emend Æpelun (Abbas) to Æthelm, but instead it seems better to emend the Risborough reading Æðelm [abbas?] to aedelm [h(un)abb(as)], as an Abbott Æthelhun witnesses an exchange by Æthelred in 833,²⁴ and a grant by Æthelflaed c. 915.²⁵ The Islington witness list has been shortened, perhaps by the St Paul's cartularist, omitting the thanes and curiously rearranging the bishops. The Islington charter has no boundary survey; presumably none was made. The Wrington boundary clause was added, along with a purported reconfirmation by King 'Eddred' (Eadred 946–955) after Glastonbury had received, lost and recovered the estate.²⁶ The Monk's Risborough bounds are inserted in a distinctive hand above the witness list, which was entered in the centre of the dorse so as to leave room for a boundary clause to be inserted following a new survey. This would have been made by Æthelfrith in or not long after 903. When Monk's Risborough was conveyed to Canterbury in 994, it was noted that the bounds were in the original charter, *litteris Saxonice et Saxonice idiomati conscripti*.²⁷ There is one specifically West Saxon form, *wealdan hrige* 'Wealda's ridge' for Waldridge, for which later forms have *Anglian Wald*.²⁸

Nothing in the Risborough bounds seems inconsistent with the date of the charter. The species count for the celebrated Black Hedge, separating the two Risboroughs, indicates that its oldest part dates from the seventh or eighth century.²⁹ It was extended, still as a blackthorn hedge, northwards towards the Upper Icknield Way and southwards as far as Windsor Hill, at estimated dates which do not differ significantly from 903. South of Windsor Hill the boundary is basically a hawthorn hedge, and appears to be of somewhat later date; but in the woodland and waste of the Chiltern dip-slope the bounds could be less detailed than near the escarpment and in the Vale.

Æthelred, as ruler of the Mercians, could issue charters in his own name³⁰ or jointly with his wife Æthelflaed,³¹ whose mother belonged to the old Mercian royal house. Æthelfrith, however, would naturally wish to have all his lost title deeds renewed together, including those for estates in Wessex, and for this King Edward's consent was needed. Æthelfrith was probably a West Saxon; the *libellus Æthelwaldi episcopi*, which is also known from extracts in the Hale papers in Lincoln's Inn,³² shows that his son inherited property in Devon.

It seems likely that Æthelfrith's subordinate ealdorodm included Middlesex, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.³³ This area, though subordinate to the Mercian heartland, was within Æthelred's realm until his death, as the Chronicle entry for 912 confirms:³⁴

Her gefor Æðered ealdorodm on Mercum; & Ladweard cyng feng to Lunden byrg³⁵ & to Oxna Forda, & to daem landum eallum þe þare to hierdon.

"In this year died Æthelred, ealdorman of Merica, and King Edward took charge of London city and of Oxford, and of all the lands which belonged thereto".

The overworked word *fōn to* 'take to' has a dozen shades of meaning. Here Toller translated *feng to* as "took possession of (as a conquest)"; Whitelock³⁷ "succeeded to"; Garmonsway³⁸ "took over". On the view taken here, what Edward did, with his sister's acquiescence, was to take direct control of Æthelfrith's sub-ealdorodm, previously within Æthelred's jurisdiction. The lands pertain-

ing to London would include Middlesex and probably the Chiltern Hundreds, where the citizens of London still enjoyed hunting rights in the twelfth century.³⁹ The rest of what was to become Buckinghamshire probably looked to Oxford as its administrative centre; for Risborough and Twyford (Bucks) this is supported by the existence of important houses in Oxford, "mural mansions" held by the lords of these manors, free from custom except for the military service and repairing the town wall,⁴⁰ which probably dates from the 890s. Islington and Monk's Risborough would thus both be within Æthelfrith's ealdorodm, both before and after 912.

At Winchester Æthelred was regarded as one ealdorman among others, *Primus inter pares*, but at Abingdon, which received the official Chronicle text up to 915⁴¹ for transcription, he was honoured as lord of the Mercians, and the transfer of the London and Oxford regions to direct West Saxon rule after his death was omitted, perhaps because this reorganisation had been resented locally. Yet it led directly to the establishment of Buckingham as the last West Saxon *burh* in 914,⁴² and thus to the formation of Buckinghamshire.

Mercia was a kingdom (*regnum*) but Æthelred's position was just short of royalty; the coins minted at Oxford bore Alfred's name.⁴³ Æthelred's earliest distinctive styles were *dux et patricius* in the Radenore (Pyrton) charter of 887⁴⁴ and *procurator* in 888.⁴⁵ There is no evidence from Æthelweard's *Chronicon*⁴⁶ that by 894 he could be called *rex Merciorum*, and one can see why. Prince Edward was besieging the Danes in Thorney, an island in the Colne, near Iver, when the period of service of his division of the *fyrð* expired and they went home. The next division of the West Saxon *fyrð* was committed to raising the siege of Exeter, and King Alfred could spare only a small force to watch the Danes at Thorney. Then Æthelred, with his permanent garrison in London, where he was active in urban renewal⁴⁷ came to Edward's help, even though this allowed another Danish army to harry Essex. The Danes capitulated, and thereafter the two brothers-in-law were brothers-in-arms, though this is hardly apparent from the official Chronicle, which does not name Thorney. Æthelweard's source for this campaign was clearly a Chronicle text or draft that was highly favourable both to

Edward and to Æthelred. It was surely their personal friendship, arising from these events, that safeguarded Mercian autonomy for the lifetimes of Æthelred and his widow, reluctant as the West Saxons were to concede this. In a charter of 898 Æthelred is no more than *dux partis regionis Merciorum*; but Edward succeeded Alfred in 898,⁴⁹ and in charters of 903–904, close in date to the group under consideration, Æthelred is more fittingly called *Myrcna hlaford*,⁵⁰ *dux et dominator Mwrriorum*.⁵¹ On his death in 912 after a long illness, Æthelweard calls him *Merciorun superstes*⁵² a very rare word, for one who stands above, perhaps translating some word for a leader or ruler such as *peoden*, which is used for the heroic ealdorman Byrhtnoth, King Edgar and Christ.

Edward's sister Æthelflaed, Alfred's daughter, was now 'lady of the Mercians', *Myrcna hlaefdige*.⁵³ The Welsh made common cause with her against the Danes, and the Welsh chronicles recording her death in 918 called her queen.⁵⁴ Her achievement during the war of reconquest made her *pavor hostium*,⁵⁵ rex rather than regina.⁵⁶ In the field she acted in perfect accord with her brother, but within a few months of her untimely death he deprived her daughter Ælfwynn of all authority in *Mercia*, which became part of his kingdom. There is one undated charter that calls him king of *Mercia*, but it is at best suspicious. Æthelfrith's ealdorship may however have retained its identity.

The rediscovery of the Islington charter is not only of concern to the historians of London and its bishopric. It puts the authenticity of the Risborough group of related charters beyond doubt, since their Latin texts are in substantial agreement and they are preserved in three distinct archives: Canterbury,

Glastonbury and St Paul's. Together they illustrate the political history of our area in its most formative period, and provide evidence of the administrative situation shortly before the South Midland shires were defined, overriding ancient boundaries and local traditions.

Discoveries of solemn charters of tenth-century kings have accelerated. In August 1993 King Edgar's charters of 958 relating to Coundon, now in Coventry, was recovered by Dr Nicholas Vincent from a sixteenth-century transcript in the Gloucestershire Record Office. At about the same time, Dr Keynes retrieved Edgar's charter of 974 for Brickenden (Herts) from a transcript in the papers of Thomas Madox (1666–1727) made c. 1700, left to the British Museum by his widow in 1756 and then ignored. As Madox's *collectanea* occupy 94 volumes the delay is inexcusable.⁵⁹ By a remarkable coincidence, both these charters belong to the 'Dunstan B' group, which includes Edgar's grant to ealdorman Byrhtnoth of Cookley (Worcs)⁶⁰ in 964 and Brayfield,⁶¹ discussed in a recent paper.⁶² Following the publication of this new evidence, there may be more to say about the mutual relations and implications of these charters.

Whole cartularies have been rediscovered. Dr Cyril Hart is editing the Barking charters in the cartulary of Ilford Hospital at Hatfield House. Still more locally we await publication of the lost cartulary of St Albans, preserved by the Bollandists at Antwerp.⁶³ This will throw light on the early history of Hertfordshire; it should settle the derivation of Chalfont, and will enable us to retrace a perambulation made when the St Albans community recovered the liberty of Winslow. *Her mon maeg giet gesion hiora swaet*.

REFERENCES

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2. J. M. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus Aevvii Saxonici VI* (1848) p. xxix
3. Bodleian Library, MS James 23; M. Gibbs, *Early Charters of the Cathedral Church of St Paul, London* (Camden 3rd ser. lviii, 1939) 1–8
4. See S. D. Keynes, 'A charter of King Edward the Elder for Islington', *Hist. Research* 66 (1993) 03–316
5. New London Guildhall Library MS 25511.
6. Keynes, 'Islington' at p. 303
7. D. M. Barratt, 'The Library of John Selden and its later history', *Bodleian Library Rec.* iii (1950–1); Keynes, 'Islington' at pp 304–5.
8. Lincoln's Inn MS, Hale 84, fas. 93–4.
9. S. Kelly, 'Trading Privileges from Eighth Century England', *Early Medieval Europe*, 1 (1992) 3–28.
10. Keynes, 'Islington' at pp 309–311.
11. S 367; W. B. Saunders, *Facsimiles of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* iii, 23
12. BL. Stowe, ch. 22
13. S 371.
14. Marquess of Bath, Longleat 39, fp. 185; ed A. Watkin, *The Great Cartulary of Glastonbury* (1952) ii, 345–6 (No 1916)

15. S 371, MS2 (Bodl. James 23, pp 33–34)
16. Not simply "estate held by charter", which would not have been distinctive, once bookland became common. See A. R. Rumble, 'Old English *Boc-landas* an Anglo-Saxon Estate Name' in *Leeds Studies in English n. s.* 18 81987) 219–230
17. S 380, 474, 555, 639.
18. The first example of a quasi-surname taken from place called Buckland seems to be *Ælfgyf of boc-lande* in a Devon manumission of c. 970 (Birch), (Birch, Cart. Sax. No 1247. Sawyer did not list manumissions)
19. *Brenhinedd y Saesson*, ed. T. Jones (1971) 14.
20. A. S. Chron. (F) s. a. 796 (for 798); Simeon of Durham *Historia Regum* s. a. 798
21. Florence of Worcester, ed. Thorpe, i. 65.
22. See ref. 1.
23. Keynes, 'Islington' 311 n 46.
24. 218
25. S225, a corrupt Abingdon text which makes Æthelflaed's daughter Ælfwynn a bishop. See F. M. Stenton, *The Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon*, (1913) 24, n. 3.
26. J. Scott, *The Early History of Glastonbury* (1981) 114, 142.
27. S 882; Baines 'Monk's Risborough' at P. 92.
28. Except for bad form *Wadrug* in *DB* 1, 144c (better as *Waldrug*, 1.
29. Baines, 'Monk's Risborough' at pp 95–98.
30. S 217, 229, 222.
31. S 221, 223.
32. Lincoln's Inn MS, Hale 34.
33. J. Blair *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994) 97 and refs nn 23.
34. AS Chron (A) f 21
35. *Luden burh*(dative *-byr(i)g*) may be the walled city of London, which Alfred had recovered in 886, as opposed to *Lunden wic*, the trading area extending further west along the Strand
36. T. N. Toller, *A. S. Dict Suppl.* (1921) 231 *sv fon* sense III (2) (c)
37. D. Whitelock ed. *Engl Hist Docs* (1968) i. 193
38. G. N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (rev. edn. (1960) 96–97.
39. F. M. Stenton, 'Norman London' in D. M. Stenton ed. *Essays Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* (1920) 23–47, at p. 24.
40. Blair *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, 157 and n 52.
41. The argument in C. Plummer, *Two of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, (1899) Introd. cxviii seems conclusive.
42. A. H. J. Baines, 'The Danish Wars and the Establishment of the Borough and County of Buckingham', *Recs Bucks* 26 11–27, at p. 21.
43. Blair A. S. *Oxfordshire* 100–1; c. f. R. H. M. Dolley ed. A. S. *Coins* (1961) 91.
44. S 217
45. S229 (not completely reliable)
46. *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, iv 3.
47. T. Dyson and J. Schofield, 'Saxon London' in J. Haslam ed. *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England* (1984) at pp 296–300; and see ref 48.
48. S 1628, referring to Æthelredes hyd (Queen hithe) in the city of London
49. For once Æthelweard rises to simple dignity in his obituary of Alfred
50. S 1446, referring to Sodbury, Gloucs, a vernacular agreement.
51. S 361, relating to Water Eaton (Oxon)
52. Chron. Æthelweardi iv. 4
53. AS *Chron(C)* s. a. 912–918 revealing Abingdon's Mercian sympathies
54. *Brenhinedd y Saesson*, 28: *Ac y bu varw Eldfled vrenhines*. The Black Book of Basingwerk even has 'vrenhines Loegr', presumably 'English queen' rather than 'Queen of England'
55. *Gesta Regum*, ed. W. Stubbs i, 136.
56. *Henry of Huntingdon*, ed. T. Arnold (Rolls Soc.) 158.
57. S 226.
58. Blair, *A. S. Oxfordshire*, 99
59. S. D. Keynes, 'The Dunstan Charters', *A. S. England* 23 (1994) 165–193.
60. S 726
61. S 750
62. A. H. J. Baines, 'Ealdorman Byrhtnoth and the Brayfield Charter of 967' *Recs. Bucks.* 34 (1992) 165–193.
63. S. D. Keynes, 'A lost Cartulary of St Albans Abbey', *A. S. England* 22 (1933) 253–279