

VENDERE POTUIT: 'HE COULD SELL', TO COIN A DOMESDAY PHRASE

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The relative freedom of small landowners in late Anglo-Saxon England to dispose of their land, by sale or inheritance, was one of the casualties of the Norman Conquest. This article examines the evidence in Domesday Book for the right to sell or grant land and also the types of individual who enjoyed this right. It is concluded that the legacy of the Danish wars was long-lasting and that there were substantial pockets of small, free landowners in the north of Buckinghamshire who suffered a sharp reduction in status after 1066.

Domesday Book is noted for its use of highly compressed, almost telegraphic, phraseology, which was an essential tool enabling the presentation of millions of facts and figures in a manageable form over a very short timescale from the initiation of the project at Christmas 1085 to its completion about a year later. There were, however, many variations in the use of language, many of them reflecting the so-called 'circuits' into which England was divided for the purpose of data collection. In the case of the 'circuit' which included Buckinghamshire, Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, one of the most common phrases, which appears at, or close to, the end of an entry, is *vendere potuit*, '(and) he (or, rarely, she) could sell'. This refers to the state of affairs on the eve of the Conquest in 1066, or more correctly from the Norman viewpoint, the day that Edward the Confessor was alive and dead in early January 1066 (hereafter TRE), since they viewed the last Saxon king, Harold II Godwineson, as a usurper.

These two words provide valuable insights into tenurial arrangements at the end of the Anglo-Saxon era, and as such are of importance to students of early medieval Buckinghamshire. The principal aim of this paper is to analyse the information on the estates where this phrase is used, their holders and their fate after 1066. It also looks

briefly at the situation in neighbouring counties, and discusses the possibility that some at least of the land in question had once formed the subject of long-lost charters issued by Anglo-Saxon kings to favoured laymen. The question of some of these small estates being leased to their pre-Conquest holders (*laenland*) is also considered.

I

This analysis is built upon earlier studies of the hidation of Domesday Bucks, and of the variation in types of manor across the county.¹ These showed that there was a progressive fragmentation of landholding as one proceeded from south to north, from the banks of the Thames to the fringes of the Danelaw, and that estates which were described as 'defending' themselves or being held 'as one manor' (*se defendit; pro uno manerio*), were similarly distributed. Many of the smallest units had never been manors, or had ceased to be so between 1066 and 1086.² There is a similar distribution of lands said to have been saleable in 1066. Equally, there is a significant difference between the proportion of land which could be sold in the various categories of estate in late eleventh-century Bucks.

After the information on hides, ploughs, populations, other assets and values, the phrase

vendere potuit is usually the final item to be noted in Domesday entries. This is hardly surprising since the notion of free, mostly quite minor tenants having the ability to engage in the selling and/or granting of their land was one of the most notable casualties of the Norman Conquest. There was, of course, nothing new in the view that *all* land ultimately belonged to the king, and that all tenants-in-chief and their sub-tenants held land on the basis of service, military or financial, a principle which then passed down through the various ranks of the peasantry, although here the services were often rendered in the form of labour. That was how Anglo-Saxon society was structured, and had been for centuries. To that extent, 'feudalism' was as much a fact of life for everybody in 986 as in 1086.³ The process by which Anglo-Saxon kings had increasingly used the charter to reward laymen with small estates, usually of less than ten hides, is too complex to discuss here, but was clearly one of the key factors in fragmenting ownership in the two hundred years before 1066.⁴ In addition, the impact of the relatively large numbers of freemen in the Danelaw (strictly only the area north of the Ouse and east of Watling Street in the case of Bucks., although the effects clearly permeated a larger area in the north of the county⁵) meant that there was an even greater degree of fragmentation in some areas, as well as an apparently active market in land, both of which were at odds with the policy adopted by William I. The picture provided by Domesday Book is therefore invaluable in capturing the final stage of a process which had been going on for several generations, probably since the late-ninth century, and it occasionally offers poignant reminders of what conquest meant to the Englishmen of Bucks.

Table 1 sets out the proportions of land in each Hundred which is said to be saleable, that which is specifically noted as not being saleable, and the remainder. The last category includes most of the land which had belonged to the king and queen, to the church and to the greater magnates, and which was no doubt deemed to be inalienable. The granting away of land by charter had to some extent been replaced during the century before 1066 by leases for life or lives (usually not more than three), which ensured the return of the property to its 'owner', in theory at least, thereby doubtless reflecting a realisation that erosion of one's patri-

mony at a time of uncertainty and instability was not a sound policy.⁶

TABLE 1:
Saleability of Land in Buckinghamshire 1066
(% based on Hides)

<i>Hundred</i>	<i>Can Sell</i>	<i>Cannot Sell</i>	<i>Other</i>
Stone	50.0	0	50.0
Aylesbury	31.6	8.0	60.4
<u>Risborough</u>	<u>39.6</u>	<u>30.2</u>	<u>30.2</u>
Aylesbury Gp.	41.2	10.5	48.3
Stoke	34.7	0.6	64.7
Burnham	46.1	0	53.9
<u>Desborough</u>	<u>31.0</u>	<u>0.7</u>	<u>68.3</u>
Chiltern Gp.	36.0	0.5	63.5
Ixhill	42.3	0	57.7
Ashendon	63.0	0	37.0
<u>Waddesdon</u>	<u>21.3</u>	<u>18.6</u>	<u>60.1</u>
Ashendon Gp.	43.6	5.2	51.2
Cottesloe	63.4	1.1	35.5
Yardley	73.6	0.6	25.7
<u>Mursley</u>	<u>35.8</u>	<u>1.8</u>	<u>62.4</u>
Cottesloe Gp.	58.4	1.2	40.4
Stotfold	69.6	4.9	25.5
Rowley	98.0	0	2.0
<u>Lamua</u>	<u>40.9</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>59.1</u>
Buckingham Gp.	67.2	1.5	31.2
Seckloe	86.0	0	14.0
Bunsty	65.6	0	34.4
<u>Moulsoe</u>	<u>76.3</u>	<u>0.9</u>	<u>22.8</u>
Newport Gp.	76.8	0.3	22.9
County	53.4	3.3	43.3

Overall, just over half of the county's hides (1,130 out of 2,123) could have been sold in 1066, compared with only 69 hides where this was specifically prohibited. If the case of Monks Risborough, which had been temporarily granted to Asgar the Staller by the archbishop of Canterbury in a now-vanished lease, is ignored, then only 39 hides, 1.8% of the total, were so restricted. Of the 915 hides whose status was not qualified in either way, 310 were in the hands of the king, queen and religious bodies, and a further 192 were held by (Earl) Harold and other members of his family.

It is instructive to compare these data with those for some of the other shires in the same Domesday 'circuit'. In all cases, the proportion of land which was specifically 'not for sale' was insignificant, between 1 and 5%. Middlesex, where the church had massive estates, although royal holdings were virtually absent, presents quite a different picture: 166 hides (19%) could be sold, 27 (3%) could not, and 687 (78%) were inalienable. As in Bucks., lands which were held by or from Asgar the Staller were generally stated as being *non potuit vendere*. In Hertfordshire, the breakdown was different again: saleable 386 hides (37%); non-saleable 55 hides (5%); neither 593 hides (57%). This county therefore occupied a position intermediate between Middlesex, where the impact of the Danelaw and granting small estates to laymen were both much reduced, and Bucks., where both influences were greater. Interestingly, in Herts., most of the estates associated with Asgar were saleable. Virtually the whole of Bedfordshire lay in the Danelaw, and royal and religious estates were relatively few. Here, 643 hides (55%) were saleable, a mere 17 hides were not (1.5%), and 512 hides were neither (43.5%), virtually identical to the pattern in Bucks. It seems therefore that areas which by 1066 had relatively small royal and ecclesiastical estates, and which were subject to the freedoms associated with Scandinavian settlement (hardly control, for this had barely lasted from the 880s to 920 in this region), had developed what was potentially a very active land market, a situation no doubt encouraged by inheritance customs in some places.⁷

In Bucks., the distinction between the regions north and south of the Chiltern escarpment in terms of the saleability of land is as marked as the variation in the use of terms to describe Domesday manors, a fact which is unlikely to be coincidental. If we smooth over local variations for now, in the six hundreds of Aylesbury and the Chilterns, 39% of land was saleable in 1066, compared with almost twice that amount (72%) in the six hundreds of north-west and north-east Bucks. In the Vale region, the Ashendon group (44% saleable) belongs with the south, while the Cottesloe group (58%) is more 'northern'. It should be emphasised however that no Buckinghamshire hundred has as little saleable land as Middlesex, and most areas have more than Hertfordshire.

The lowest level is in Waddesdon Hundred, with 21%, but this reflects an unusually high proportion of land which could not be sold (19% – representing the main estates in East Claydon and Quarrendon, both held in 1066 by Swein, a man of Asgar the Staller [see above]). Neighbouring Aylesbury Hundred has 32% accounted saleable, while Desborough, in the Thames–Wycombe area, has 31%. As usual with Domesday Book, it is unwise to press generalisations too far. Thus, while Rowley Hundred, on the claylands south of the Great Ouse between Beachampton and Tingewick, had virtually every estate in the *vendere potuit* category (98%), its neighbour Lamua, in very similar terrain between Adstock and Marsh Gibbon, had only 41% so described. There is a similar, if less pronounced, dichotomy between neighbours Cottesloe and Mursley Hundreds (63% and 36%, respectively). Yardley, the third component of this group, had 74% saleable, and included the highly fragmented villis of Cheddington and Pitstone alongside large unitary estates like Edlesborough (20 hides, which could be sold in 1066) and Ivinghoe (also 20 hides, but the property of the bishop of Winchester and hence inalienable). Even in the Newport group in the north-east, the proportion of land which could be sold in 1066 ranged from 86% in Seckloe Hundred to 66% in Bunsty, although the latter lay firmly in what had been the Danelaw, north of the Ouse.

This geographical variation is not the only element of difference in the incidence of *vendere potuit* in late Anglo-Saxon Bucks. If we examine the relationship between its occurrence and the type of estate to which it relates, there is an equally clear pattern. (It should be remembered that the mix of estate types varies from north to south, so that the use of the phrase *pro uno manerio* [(held as) one manor] is absent in the south, and increases towards the north, and the same is generally true of *se defendit* [answers for x hides]. Places which had lost manorial status between 1066 and 1086 are more evenly spread, although there is a concentration in the Chiltern Hundreds. Estates which had never had manorial status are generally very small – 2 hides or less – and are also more common in the north.)

The M estates in the Aylesbury group are distorted by Bledlow, a substantial thirty-hide manor covering a large tract of land on the chalk and the

TABLE 2:
Saleability by Manorial Type (%)

Hundred Gp.	M* (Manerium)	Pro Uno Manerio	Se Defendit	Manor 1066*	Other Land
Aylesbury	40.6	None	50.0	59.4	82.5
Chiltern	22.4	None	100.0	83.5	89.4
Ashendon	34.8	17.5	69.2	90.4	70.4
Cottesloe	31.8	87.9	67.6	86.2	91.1
Buckingham	46.8	72.0	78.9	90.9	86.9
Newport	66.3	79.9	74.0	96.6	100.0
County	37.7	72.0	73.1	85.6	87.5

* M appears as a marginal rubric, generally believed to be an abbreviation for *manerium*.

* Estates which were manors in 1066, but no longer in 1086.

clay. It was held in 1066 by Eadmer Ator, a king's thegn, his only local estate. (Most of his extensive holdings were in the West Country, although he had small estates at Stanmore in Middlesex [9.5 hides], and at Little Gaddesden, Herts. [5 hides].) Excluding Bledlow, the saleable proportion in the Aylesbury area would be 30%. Overall, however, the picture is clear with a sharp increase in the amount of land which could be sold in the six northern hundreds, and especially those in the north-east, closest to the Danelaw. *Pro uno manerio* ('held as one manor') estates do not occur in the south, and in the Ashendon Hundreds, only 2.5 hides in Quainton were saleable. Elsewhere, however, about four-fifths of these manors could be sold in 1066. Manors described by the term *Se defendit* estates ('answers for' x hides) are uncommon in south Bucks. Only Broughton, Ditton and Hitcham were able to be sold by their pre-Conquest owners in this region. In the Vale and Ouse valley regions, such estates were more common, and around three-quarters were saleable. 'Manors' which had lost that status after 1066 were generally very small, and fall in with land which had never been accounted manorial (in the sense that its geld liability was discharged through another estate). Both types have 80-90% saleability levels. Viewed from the opposite perspective, such small parcels of land probably reflect in some measure the effects of a land market whose details are largely lost to us, as well as the operation of inheritance regimes of different kinds (see below). The process was in reality somewhat circular: saleability was a function of fragmentation, and vice versa. The decline in the number of manors between 1066 and 1086 reflects a general consolidation of the previous pattern and a dramatic reduction in

the number of landowners (tenants-in-chief) after the Conquest. In 1066, there were 518 separate 'estates' in Bucks., which had declined to 390 twenty years later, 25% fewer. Almost two-thirds of this reduction occurred in the Newport group, with Cottesloe contributing 12%.

Saleable holdings were generally very small in terms of their hidage, and were also smaller than average in relation to all holdings in the county.

TABLE 3:
Size of Holdings 1066: *Vendere Potuit* & All Bucks.

Hides	<i>Vendere Potuit</i>		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%
<1	118	34.3	141	35.8
1-2	78	22.7	82	20.8
2-5	96	27.9	52	13.2
>5	52	15.1	119	30.2

Some 57% of saleable land was in holdings of less than two hides, virtually identical with the proportion for all estates. The proportions of land under five hides are 85% and 70%, respectively. Thus, although a high degree of fragmentation of land ownership is characteristic of Bucks. as a whole (average holding about 4.5 hides), it is even more so in the case of saleable property (average 3.3 hides). Given that the free sale and inheritance of land were likely to promote division, this is not surprising. Although the drastic rearrangement of ownership after 1066 to some extent reversed this tendency, it soon reasserted itself, as witness the large number of so-called 'manors' which appeared in the following centuries. At a lower level,

there was an active peasant land market, which produced similar fragmentation in the open fields, and also in enclosed parts of the county. Once the break-up of the royal patrimony to endow the church and favoured laymen had begun in the seventh century, the process both accelerated and became unstoppable.

II

It is reasonable to assume that the use of the phrase *vendere potuit* in connexion with certain Buckinghamshire estates at the time of the Conquest reflects both tenurial realities, and also the social ones underlying them. One of the biggest differences between the Danelaw and the rest of England is the number of freemen, or sokemen, who occur in the Domesday folios relating to the former.⁹ Soke is a complex subject. Reduced to its basics, sokemen were individuals who held their land freely, and were able to place themselves under the control of any overlord that they chose (commendation), even if that were not the 'owner' of the estate in question. They were also able to dispose of their land freely, to 'grant and sell' it in Domesday terms. They were not necessarily prosperous, however, given the smallness of many of their holdings in 1066. Many held only one or two virgates, a unit which later medieval sources show to have been some 15–40 acres in Bucks. This was barely sufficient for sustaining a family without additional sources of income, and many non-free manorial tenants held more land than this. In Middlesex, where details of peasant landholdings are given, villeins with two or more virgates are not uncommon, and the same is likely to have been true in Bucks. (It should be remembered, however, that peasant land was subject to numerous exactions by manorial lords, which meant that its effective yield was less than that of an equivalent free holding.¹⁰) In the Hundred Rolls, a survey of land holdings made in the 1270s but surviving only in fragmentary form, free tenants with one-quarter of a virgate or less (about 5–10 acres) represented 59% of freeholders, compared with 27% of villeins with such small holdings, although the rents for the latter were often much higher, having been fixed long before.

The general explanation of this bias towards small freeholdings is that they underwent con-

tinual fragmentation because of the operation of the land market and partible inheritance. The rules governing inheritance varied geographically almost more than any other feature of society, often over short distances, but overlying this was the basic difference between impartible bond land and partible free land.¹¹ Partibility, or division between co-heirs, seems to have been more prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon period, with primogeniture increasingly developing over time. Freemen were not therefore so favoured a group in medieval society as their status might imply, despite their ability to sell and pass on their land. This reflects the inherent defect of allowing agricultural land to fragment, giving rise to uneconomical plots and creating either rural poverty for those concerned or a strong pressure to leave the land for other forms of occupation. Much of this was of course in the future in 1086, but Domesday Book nevertheless records a situation in which being in possession of one's own minute property was not necessarily an advantage.

The process of commendation could in practice lead to relationships between lord and man which were not far removed from those developed from formal grants or leases of land.¹² In other words, it could come to resemble a landlord-tenant situation, even though there was no obligation on the man to pay rent or to perform services. The lord was, after all, in theory at least, providing some kind of benefit, and it was not in the nature of the proto-feudal system to provide something for nothing. The original vague nexus of commendation may have led to bargains which resembled *laens* (a type of lease, see below), and where the land may ultimately have fallen into the lord's hands. The land came with the man, but could easily become a heritable tenancy from the lord. Although Domesday Book does not make it clear, even the 'co-operatives' of smallholding thegns and sokemen who appear in places like Soulbury, Chicheley and Lavendon in 1066 were probably holding their land from (*de*) somebody, even if they were not under (*sub*) that person in the sense which applies by 1086.

In the Danelaw proper, sokemen often owed agricultural services of some kind, bringing them more closely in line with the semi-free peasantry. These included so-called fold-soke, whereby they

had to pasture some of their livestock overnight, or for longer periods, on the demesne, in order to enhance its fertility.¹³ It is also possible, although not documented, that ostensibly free men owed what might be called 'mill-soke'. This meant that they had to have their corn ground at the lord of the manor's mill. Since the latter was presumably alone in being able to afford the costly infrastructure needed to build a watermill, he would have had an effective monopoly on milling.¹⁴ Some Bucks. mills in 1086 were worth a significant proportion of the total value of an estate, including those along the Ouse in the north-east of the county, where the 'minor' thegns mostly occur. In areas where watermills are few or absent, it is possible that free tenants provided their own querns to grind the corn.

Domesday does not record the status of land other than at the time of the Conquest, but the largest upheaval of land ownership in English history over such a short period rapidly destroyed the effects of five centuries of evolution. Apart from the holdings of the church and the king, virtually every acre of Bucks. changed hands in this tenurial revolution, a remarkable, if ruthless, achievement. Apart from these fixed points, only 31.5 hides were in the same hands in 1066 as 1086, about 1.5% of the county total, although Englishmen still held 54 hides at the latter date, a reflection of continuing fluidity in the ownership of land. The latter comprised 37 holdings, many of half a hide or less, the largest being four estates of four hides (Edeva at Little Linford, Alric at Marsh Gibbon, and Alfsi at Chesham and at Shortley in Quainton, the last having been acquired as part of his wife's dowry from her father Wulfward, the owner in 1066). And all of them were now firmly under the control of one of William's tenants-in-chief, and by inference no longer freely disposable. Small wonder that Alric, who now held his land at Marsh Gibbon by renting it from William fitzAnsculf, did so *graviter et miserabiliter*, 'harshly and wretchedly', a rare human insight among the dry Domesday statistics and a suitable comment on most pre-Conquest land holders in Bucks.¹⁵

It is strange that this wholesale upheaval in ownership did not consolidate the most highly subdivided locations under one or two new tenants. Thus, although three of Chesham's estates passed

to the bishop of Bayeux, they are still listed separately, while there were still six discrete entities in neighbouring Amersham, five of them half-hide properties carried over from their previous English owners. Soulbury remained divided between six holders, although this in part reflects the scattered settlements which made up the parish, of which Hollingdon has its own separate entries for three estates. At Cheddington, two of the seven holdings were held by the count of Mortain in 1086 (total two hides), but the remainder were held by five other tenants-in-chief. Lavendon, the most fragmented vill in Bucks., with ten Domesday entries, had experienced a higher degree of consolidation. The bishop of Coutances held four estates, totalling nine hides, about half the total, while countess Judith, widow of the executed English rebel Waltheof, held three small estates totalling 5.5 hides. It seems that the process of allocating land to the Conqueror's followers was more concerned with speed than tidiness, and many of the very small properties which survived in 1086 did so because the principle of allocating all of the previous holder's lands to one individual was more important, and easier, than wholesale rearrangement, which would no doubt have led to much litigation.

III

The Buckinghamshire Domesday has little to say about sokemen, perhaps because the term was not in widespread use outside the Danelaw proper, which in our case includes only Bunsty Hundred, lying north of the Ouse and east of Watling Street.¹⁶ In 1066, 34 sokemen are mentioned, of whom eleven held half a hide each at the main estate in Soulbury, the rest being scattered in small numbers from Chesham in the south to Olney in the north. Between them, they held a fraction under 31 hides, about 1.4% of the shire total, an average of 0.9 hides each, which supports the remarks made above about the generally low status of sokemen. With the sole exception of the individual at West Wycombe, all of the men could sell their land. All but two had been dispossessed by 1086, although seven more had 'appeared' at Weston Underwood I. This is not necessarily as unusual as it seems, however, since the holders of these 7.5 hides in 1066 were ten thegns, Burgred's

men, and Alric's man, who held three virgates. The thegns were evidently quite different from the classic middle-ranking Anglo-Saxon landowner, with his five hides, hall and bell-(tower), a true man-of-property.¹⁷ These ten had only two-thirds of a hide apiece, between forty and eighty acres, little more than the more prosperous villein. Burgred's and Alric's eleven men in 1066 seem to have been transformed into seven sokemen and four villeins (or possibly three of the latter and the odd Frenchman who appears in 1086), suffering some depression of status in the process, as did all the other pre-Conquest sokemen.

The description of such small landowners as 'thegns' in 1066 is quite common in Bucks., and also in neighbouring Bedfordshire. Baring noticed this almost a century ago,¹⁸ and the folios certainly bear this out. There are 39 thegns in Bucks. who held what might be described as 'typical' estates in 1066, often more than one. Between them, they held 594 hides (28% of the total), an average of fifteen hides each. They seem to fall into two sub-groups, however, those with respectively more or less than ten hides in total. The former sub-group has nineteen members, with an average holding of 26 hides, whereas the latter has twenty thegns, and an average of just over five hides, the theoretical threshold for thegnly rank. Many of the greater thegns were described as 'king's or queen's thegns' and many held land outside Bucks., as well as at a variety of places in the county. For example, Alnoth 'the Kentishman' held two neighbouring ten-hide estates at Chetwode and Tingewick, while Sired had Great Kimble and Great Missenden, thirty hides in all. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there were a further seventy-five thegns in Bucks. whose aggregate holdings were only 71.5 hides (average 0.95 hides). This compares with an average 0.91 hides for the sokemen [see above] of 1066, and strongly suggests that this is a case of using slightly different terms to describe the same thing, a common enough feature of Domesday.

Many king's thegns could sell or grant their lands and choose their lord, and were evidently not bound to the ruler by any kind of formal grant such as a charter, although that does not mean that they owed no obligations (see above).¹⁹ Men who were described in 1066 as 'king's', 'queen's', or 'x's' thegns were not endowed with their estates by an

overlord, since they would not then have been able to sell or grant the property in the way described.²⁰ Estates which could be sold may have been perpetually inheritable, held for life, or held for three lives, or the link between lord and thegn may have been weak, a mere commendation, dissoluble at any time. In eleventh-century England a (major) thegn was a military man, who owed obligations to somebody higher in the feudal order. The origin of this particular type of thegn developed in the household of great men, and is responsible for the confusion which surrounds the term.²¹ Later the retainer became a warrior endowed with land, and relationship became status, originally defined by the 1,200 shilling *wergild*, six times that of a free farmer, or *ceorl*. Partible inheritance, as we have seen, may equally have led to a situation in which so-called thegns were poor, even landless. By 1066, the military obligations were determined by geld liability or hidage assessment, where five hides were to produce one fully-equipped warrior. Suitably endowed men could become thegns, but the key thing was to have a lord, even if the bond was not fixed at that stage.

Although it is at first sight surprising that the term 'thegn' should have been used to cover such a wide range of men, a brief examination of its roots shows that this is not necessarily the case.²² Old English *ðegn* is from a common Germanic stem, with parallels in Old Saxon and Old High German *thegan* and *degan*, meaning 'boy, servant, warrior, hero', and in Old Norse *ðegn*, 'freeman, liegeman'. The Primitive Germanic root **tek-no-*, conveys the sense 'boy, child', hence begetting. The Anglo-Saxons seem to have used the word in all of these senses, thus 'servant, minister, attendant' and '[military] retainer, holder of land by military service'. The 'major' thegns, holders of at least five hides, clearly belong to the latter group, and as such are no different from middling tenants and sub-tenants of the so-called feudal regime imposed by William after 1066. The 'minor' thegns (and sokemen), on the other hand, seem more like retainers who had acquired, or been rewarded with, small holdings, barely sufficient to support their families. Many of them are, indeed, sub-tenants to the grander thegns. Quite why some were called sokemen and the rest thegns is perhaps a reflection of the marginal position which Bucks. occupied vis-à-vis the Danelaw.

In Bedfordshire, sokemen holding land are much more common than minor thegns in 1066 (362 cf. 22), for that shire was almost wholly in the Danelaw. They are still very much the same sort of people, however, with an average holding of only 0.52 hides. Many of them also held estates in groups, reaching 20 at Tilbrook (0.25 hides each), 21 at Marston Mortaine (0.39 hides each) and 24 at Wilden (average 0.21 hides). As in Bucks., both classes of individual suffered from the changes brought about by the Conquest. The number of sokemen decreased by 70–80%, while the hundred-plus thegns disappeared altogether.²³ Middlesex offers a very different picture. It lay wholly outwith the Danelaw, and there is no reference to either sokemen or 'minor' thegns, either in 1066 or in 1086.²⁴ In this shire, however, details are provided of sub-tenants' holdings, expressed in hides, virgates and acres. (These hides are 'real', as opposed to fiscal, and seem likely to represent the formula that one virgate=30 acres, one hide=4 virgates=120 acres.) There were three categories of villein holding in Middlesex, one hide/half-hide; one virgate; less than one virgate. The largest of these equates to the sort of property held by individual sokemen and minor thegns in Bucks. and Beds., emphasising that it was freedom to sell and bequeath that characterised the latter, rather than landholding and wealth.

The importance of the Danelaw boundary for the presence or relative absence of sokemen is apparent in Northamptonshire. There were still 849 sokemen here in 1086, with few to the west of Watling Street, increasing north-eastwards to 36% of the population in the Soke of Peterborough.²⁵ Like neighbouring Bucks. and Beds., Northants. has a plethora of very small estates entered separately in Domesday Book, although in this case they are often held by named individuals, rather than by the anonymous groups which seem to be much more typical of the other two counties. This phenomenon makes it difficult to judge the extent to which the sokemen and thegns in question actually cooperated in the cultivation of their tiny 'estate', or in other words associated with the semi-free peasants in working an open-field system, or whether they worked separately. There seems to have been a lower limit of half-a-hide, below which the Domesday commissioners and juries took no interest in the minutiae of Anglo-Saxon tenurial and agricultural arrange-

ments, which resulted in scores of freemen being lumped together in the final record.

In general, therefore, sokemen and minor thegns in both Bucks. and Beds. seem to represent classes of free peasant, *ceorl* in the traditional Anglo-Saxon social hierarchy, who still retained the right to sell their land, and presumably to dispose of it as they wished to their heirs on death, but who otherwise were no better off in terms of acreage than many of the villeins (although they did of course benefit also from the absence of onerous labour and financial services). Their decline in status had probably begun well before 1066, as witnessed by the intense fragmentation of many small estates in both shires, and Domesday Book shows that it gathered pace in the aftermath of the Conquest, when the old right to sell and grant was replaced by rent payments to new masters, and in some cases by even more onerous services, as freemen joined the ranks of the semi-free peasants. Maitland suggested that the groups of thegns which feature in counties like Bucks. and Beds. may have been co-heirs, the result of the operation of partibility.²⁶ All thegns may in theory have had equal status, but they clearly did not enjoy equal rank. This phenomenon had certainly appeared by the early-eleventh century, for Cnut's laws recognised that the heriot of a king's thegn, including four horses and fifty mancuses (1,500 pence), was considerably greater than that of a 'middle' or 'lesser' thegn, which included one horse and set of arms (500 pence).²⁷

Bucks. estates with substantial groups of 'thegns' are listed below:

<i>Estate</i>	<i>Thegns 1066</i>	<i>Avg. Hides</i>	<i>Villeins 1086</i>
Great Linford 4	3	0.79	5
Caldecote 1	4	1.06	1*
Loughton 2	5	0.90	5
Bow Brickhill 3 pt.	5	0.40	9
Tickford	5	0.18	6
Chearsley 1	6	1.42	6
Stoke Hammond	7	0.59	12
Lavendon 2	7	0.59	7
Chicheley 3	9	0.42	5

*There were also two *vavassores* in 1086, paying 32s. 6d. They were two of only three in the whole of England, and in later times were a kind of superior freeman.²⁸ They may have been connected with the borough of Newport Pagnell, whose relationship with the surrounding rural estates caused some confusion to the compilers of DB.²⁹

With the exception of Chearsley, all of these places are in the north-east of the county, most of them in vills which are more or less intensely subdivided into minute estates, rarely assessed at more than three or four hides. It will be apparent from the table that many, if not all, of the minor thegns in these fragmented holdings could have been absorbed into the ranks of villeins between 1066 and 1086.

It is interesting that sokemen are not generally noted in the north of the county. Most are in the Chiltern region and adjacent parts of the Vale. In these cases, perhaps, the jurisdictional aspects of soke, the commendation of one man to the protection of another, but not necessarily the owner of the estate in question, was seen as more important than the mere ability to sell one's land. For example, two individuals at (?)North Marston are said to belong to the king's soke, although neither holding was in royal hands by 1066. At Wendover, two sokemen had added themselves and their 1.5 hides to the royal manor since 1066, and another three men had placed their hide, previously separate, under the king there.³⁰ These separate holdings may represent newly-cleared land in the Chilterns, which had hitherto enjoyed autonomy, but which the uncertainty of the years after 1066 had led the owners to seek out royal protection.

The question of the origins of sokemen and 'minor' thegns arises naturally from this analysis, although it is impossible to offer any kind of definitive answer. Given their concentration in the north-east of Bucks., close to or within the area assigned to Danish rule in the 880s, it is attractive to suppose that they represent the descendants of 'free' Scandinavian settlers, maintaining the right to sell and divide their land, and to seek out any lord that they chose. In view of the fact that this area had been reconquered within fifty years, however, it would be surprising if such customs prevailed unaltered for another century and a half.³¹ As with the occasional evidence for the use of the Danish duodecimal system in the hidation of estates in Bucks. (the six- as opposed to the five-hide principle), there is a scattering of place- and personal-names in eleventh- and twelfth-century sources which does demonstrate Norse influence, and not just in north Bucks.³² The freemen of the pre-Conquest Chilterns are as, if not more, likely

to represent an essentially individualistic way of life, typical of forest regions, where land was cleared and farmed in severalty, rather than in common.³³ Both traditions had elements of freedom and servility, even if the Scandinavian tended more to the former, and the Anglo-Saxon to the latter. The two approaches were, it seems, well-fused in Bucks. by 1066, even if the nomenclature of free men varied between areas. It should also be remembered that there were many estates in 1066 whose owners 'could sell' but who are described neither as sokemen nor as thegns.

IV

We turn now to those Bucks. estates which could be sold in 1066, but which are altogether more significant properties than those held by sokemen and minor thegns. There were 88 holdings of five hides or more in this category, with a combined hidage of 762, 36% of the county total. Fifty-two of them were regular five-hide units (59%, cf. all holdings 54%), and many of the remainder lay in places where the tenure was fragmented, but where the total assessment was a multiple of five hides.³⁴ This suggests that the *vendere potuit* status of their owners in 1066 may owe something to the process by which land was granted away by successive Anglo-Saxon kings to reward their followers, especially in the period after 900, when most such estates comprised ten hides or less. It was usual for the king to reserve only the three basic military requirements of fyrd service, work on *burhs* and bridge work (the so-called *trinodas necessitas*).³⁵ The land was otherwise alienated to the new owner, and hence disposable in the terms understood by the compilers of Domesday Book.

Buckinghamshire is not blessed with many surviving pre-Conquest charters, although many of those that exist relate to grants of small-medium estates to laymen, as opposed to the earlier, usually much larger, grants to the church. The existence in 1066 of large numbers of five-hide estates (and multiples thereof) which could be sold or passed on without reference to any higher authority, implies that some at least had once been the subject of charters now lost. This section will consider the evidence for continuity between the original grants

which do survive, and examine the case for other locations where there are no such documents.

Wotton Underwood was the object of a charter in 843×855, when it was acquired by Forthred 'thegn' from King Berhtwulf of Mercia.³⁶ That it was a commercial transaction rather than a gift is shown by the fact that Forthred paid 30 mancuses and 900 shillings for nine hides. A mancus was a unit of account equal to thirty pence, and was considered by Harmer to be of gold, whereas shillings represented multiples of the standard silver penny.³⁷ The price was therefore 100 shillings plus 100 pence-worth of gold per hide, a considerable sum which indicates that Forthred was a 'major' rather than a 'minor' thegn of the sort discussed above. By 1066, Wotton's assessment had been rounded up to a more usual ten hides, perhaps by clearance of more of the woodland which gave the place its name. The holder was then Edeva, wife of Wulfward, who was described as 'Queen Edith's man'. His is a common name, so it is difficult to be certain how many Bucks. estates held by Wulfwards were his. Edeva, however, certainly held Worminghall and Ludgershall I in addition to Wotton, a total of 24 hides. There were too many changes and upheavals between 850 and 1066 to enable any connexion between Forthred and Edeva to be posited, although it is possible that these estates were brought by her to Wulfward as a dowry, having descended in her family for several generations. Certainly all were saleable in 1066, and may originally all have had charters.

That all Anglo-Saxon land transfers were not 'free' to the recipient is evidenced again in the will of the ætheling Æðelstan, a son of Æðelred 'the Unready', who predeceased his father in 1015.³⁸ One of his bequests was of *Merelafan* (Marlow) to the Old Minster at Winchester, the 'family' church of the West Saxon kings. Æðelstan states that he had purchased the estate from his father for 250 mancuses of gold, equivalent to 7,500 pence. In 1066, however, 'Marlow' was divided between four estates, two Great and two Little, none of which was in the hands of the Old Minster. Given the crises which beset the last years of Æðelred's reign, and the replacement of his lineage by Danish rulers between 1017 and 1042, it may be that Æðelstan's grant never took effect.³⁹ The total hidage in 1066 was thirty, giving an average price

of only 250 pence per hide, about one-sixth of what Forthred had had to pay for Wotton. It may be of course that Æðelstan had only acquired part of the Marlow estate. Marlow I (part of Little Marlow) in 1066 was held by Queen Edith, wife of the Confessor and sister of Harold Godwinson, and may always have been in royal hands. It was assessed at five hides, which, if it had been bought for 250 mancuses, would represent a price of 1,500 pence per hide, comparable with the 1,300 at Wotton in the mid-ninth century.

Although it was a long-term possession of the archbishops of Canterbury, Monks Risborough was treated rather flexibly in the tenth-eleventh centuries. In the 990s, a time when the government of Æðelred 'the Unready' was hard-pressed by Danish attacks, and the payment of 'danegeld' had become normal, Archbishop Sigeric had been forced to raise cash by a [temporary] grant of Risborough to the local bishop, Æscwig of Dorchester.⁴⁰ The thirty-hide estate had produced the not inconsiderable sum of ninety pounds of silver and 200 mancuses of gold. Assuming that a pound weight of silver equated to 240 silver pennies, the yield per hide was 720 pence, rather lower than the probable market value, but this was in the nature of a forced sale. (In 1066, Monks Risborough was temporarily in the hands of Asgar the Staller, but it could not be alienated from the church.)

Anglo-Saxon wills often reveal the transfer of land, and although these are of course 'gifts', rather than sales, they do show the flexibility of the tenurial system. Halton, a five-hide estate in the hands of the archbishop in 1066, had been bequeathed to the church after both their deaths by Wulfnoth and his wife before 1020. Canterbury then agreed to let Toki hold the estate for his lifetime (1020×1038), the agreement being continued by special request (1038×1050).⁴¹ Halton, 'settlement at a corner or nook', may once have belonged to either the Wendover estate, or that comprising Weston [Turville] and Aston [Clinton]. It represents a typical thegnly estate, granted by a missing charter, possibly to Wulfnoth at the turn of the eleventh century, although more likely to one of his predecessors in the calmer times of fifty years earlier. His name is purely English, whereas that of Toki is Scandinavian.

Arnold Baines has suggested that Toki, who was married to a certain Æðelflæd, may have been Wulfnoth's son-in-law.⁴²

In 966, King Eadgar granted an estate of ten hides at Linslade to his kinswoman Ælfgifu, the wife of his brother and predecessor Eadwig.⁴³ This lady made her will at some time between 966 and 975, in which she bequeathed not only Linslade, but also Wing, Haversham and Marsworth to the king, together with other properties in various counties.⁴⁴ None of these remained in royal hands in 1066, and must therefore have been the subject of further, lost charters. All the Bucks. estates apart from Haversham were saleable at the time of the Conquest. Linslade's assessment had been increased from ten hides to fifteen in the intervening century, although the five hides assigned to the demesne were probably exempt from payment of geld.⁴⁵

We have already noted that only two of the Bucks. Domesday estates which could be sold were the subject of surviving Anglo-Saxon charters (Linslade and Wotton Underwood). The evident fluidity of landholding in the county, right down to the reign of Edward the Confessor, when the church acquired estates at Denham, Weedon and Granborough, together with the vagaries of document survival, makes it likely that many of the five-hide estates which were saleable in 1066 had come into the hands of their owners by charter grants and/or bequests. The general trend in such grants between the end of the ninth century and 1066 suggests that the most important period for the fragmentation of the earlier territorial estates lay in the mid- to late-tenth century, when the need for creating and rewarding a class of military supporters was greatest. These are the 'major' thegns of pre-Conquest Bucks., as opposed to their 'minor' counterparts, discussed in the previous section, who were merely free smallholders, elsewhere called sokemen.

One estate must have been the subject of a charter, now lost: the name Buckland means 'bookland, land granted by charter'. In 1066, it was one of the bishop of Dorchester's local estates (the see was soon transferred to Lincoln). It was temporarily held by Godric, Bishop Wulfwig's brother, and was one of the few Bucks. estates

where the *inability* to sell was specifically noted. The charter in question may have referred to the grant to Dorchester, or to an earlier grant from a king to a layman, who then passed it on to the church. The cluster of estates at Chetwode, Barton Hartshorn (ten hides each) and Preston Bisset (fifteen hides), represents subdivisions of a substantial block of territory including Chetwode and Hillesden which had been the subject of a grant from King Eadred to Æðelmær *praeses* (ealdorman) in 949.⁴⁶ The absence of subsequent charters and wills makes it impossible to identify the processes by which this estate was broken down. Some of the holders in 1066 may have been descendants of Æðelmær.

A majority of the five-hide units which were deemed saleable in 1066 were qualified with the marginal rubric *M*, for *manerium*, 29 out of fifty (58%). Fourteen (28%) were described as 'answering for x hides' (*se defendit*), four (8%) were 'held as one manor' (*pro uno manerio*), all of them assessed at five hides. The balance of three estates had been manors in 1066, but were no longer so twenty years later, being accounted for with neighbouring properties: Marlow 1, Saunderton 2 and Bow Brickhill 1 (all five hides). All these estates were therefore manors in 1066, and it seems likely that all had once been the subject of grants from kings to laymen. Some had subsequently passed into the hands of the church.

V

There is no surviving documentary evidence for the granting of leases in pre-Conquest Bucks., creating a tenure known as *laenland*.⁴⁷ In practice, the distinction between loans and gifts in the Anglo-Saxon period was often unclear. A loan might be seen as a temporary gift, whereas a gift might be a permanent, but not perpetual, loan. The beneficiary of a loan or gift may or may not have paid rent or owed services, and the waters were further muddied by the bonds of patronage and commendation, as we have already seen. Even kings had difficulty in preventing loans or short-term gifts from becoming hereditary.

OE *laen* (Germ. *Lehn*) means loan, even if medieval sources are often translated as 'fief, fee'.⁴⁸

Some transactions were pseudo-gifts in response to royal 'requests', to which the church was equally vulnerable. There are two levels at which the loan/gift operated: the aristocratic, between kings and retainers, or between superior and inferior lords; and the local, between lord and cultivator, what would later become the agricultural lease, for which there is no pre-Conquest evidence. Bishop Oswald of Worcester made seventy 'loans' of 180 hides in the period 962-992.⁴⁹ The tenancies thus created were held under (*sub*), if not from (*de*) the bishop, although these men became in many ways the bishop's men, subject to his jurisdiction. Occasionally money was paid in advance (cf. Wotton Underwood and Marlow, above), or there were rent or services owed on an annual basis. There may have been peripheral military obligations to the lessor, for example provision of horses, riding on errands and so on, evidence for which is still to be found in some shires in 1086.⁵⁰ Leases for three lives granted at the end of the tenth century may still have been in force in 1066, after which the system was replaced by the tenant-in-chief/sub-tenant nexus of the Norman regime, although this was probably not in practice very different, being compounded of a mixture of rents and [military] service.

In Buckinghamshire the church was generally weak. The core church estates in Bucks. were inalienable, but in total were assessed at only 207 hides, barely 10% of the total. However they had obtained their lands, the thegns and other small landowners of Bucks. in the last years of Anglo-Saxon rule do not seem to have been bound by very onerous ties to any superior authority. The way in which various overlords' 'men' are scattered across the county, often in areas remote from their superior's holdings, would suggest that commendation was a much more important factor in Bucks. than either soke or the granting of charters and leases.

A good example is provided by Archbishop Stigand, who held West Wycombe himself in 1066, but whose 'men' held land at Horton (near Slough), Ellesborough, the Hampdens, Horton (in Slapton), Hartwell, Taplow and Cheddington. Laymen of middling status (that is, excluding the great magnates with estates scattered across many shires) could have more concentrated affinities.

Ælfward Cild held Great Horwood (10 hides), shared Swanbourne 3 with one of his men (4.75) and had other men at Drayton Parslow and Salden. Avelin, a king's thegn, and his men had estates at Dinton, Hartwell 1 & 2, Aston Sandford and Walldridge. It is not clear in some of these cases whether commendation was the driving force, or whether the overlord was deliberately placing his men on lands which he had acquired or inherited.

VI

One final aspect of this investigation of the phrase *vendere potuit* and its significance concerns the extent to which divided villis display complete or partial saleability. These are places whose name appears two or more times in the Domesday folios, with different owners in 1066, and usually also in 1086, but which are not obviously separate settlements (like, for instance, the two Risboroughs and the two Kimbles). This does not, however, mean that the duplication in the use of a place-name like Soulbury, Pitstone or Lavendon is not in fact concealing separate settlements, some of which survive under a different name (e.g. Bragenham and Chelmscote in the case of Soulbury), or which have subsequently vanished from the landscape. The key to the multiplication of entries in Domesday Book is the liability of property for geld in its own right, rather than being subsumed under a larger entity. It seems certain that settlement in Edlesborough parish, for example, was as scattered then as it is now, but that none of the subordinate places had ever broken away to make its mark in the sources.

There are in excess of one hundred places which were divided in 1066 where there is some incidence of land which could be sold by its last Anglo-Saxon owner. Several of them, however, are not as straightforward as they might seem. For example, Wendover 1, a royal estate assessed at 24 hides and definitely not 'for sale', included 1.5 hides held by two sokemen in 1086 which had not been there in 1066. This land may or may not have been within the boundaries of what became Wendover parish: we are merely being told that these men placed themselves under the king's protection in the interim. Similarly, the single hide at Wendover 2 (possibly Kingshill), held by three

men in both years, had been placed in the 'revenue' (*firma*) of the king after 1066. Other estates where the bulk of the land seems not to have been saleable in 1066, but which included an element of this in 1086 are: Iver (five hides out of 17, held by Queen Edith's and Sæwulf's men, but not in Iver in 1066); Chalfont [St. Giles] (0.5 hides out of 4.75, held by Alfward); Taplow (one hide out of 8.25, held by Archbishop Stigand's man); Oakley (2 hides out of 5.75, held by Ælfgyð, a girl who was employed to teach Godric the sheriff's daughter gold embroidery); Twyford (3 out of 17 hides, held by Harold's man); Calverton (2 hides out of 10, held by Queen Edith's man); Olney (1.5 virgates out of 10 hides, held by a sokeman of Burgred), and Sherington (4 hides out of 10, held as two manors by Alwin, Edwin son of Burgred's man [1 hide] and Oswulf, King Edward's man [3 hides]; Edwin held the main estate). Most of these places are in areas where woodland clearance was proceeding actively in the eleventh century, and it seems likely that the subsidiary, saleable, elements represent separate farms and fields, distinct from the main settlement, and possibly in detached portions at some distance. Certainly, there are many such detached parts of parishes in south Bucks., including Taplow and Chalfont.

There remain 98 examples of divided villis in 1066 with references to saleable land. They fall into two categories. There are fifty in which all of the components could be sold, and forty-eight where some could be sold, and the rest have no comment (although very rarely is it actually stated that the land was *not* saleable). This silence on the part of the Domesday juries is difficult to interpret, for while some kinds of estate, notably those belonging to the crown and the church, were clearly inalienable and did not need to have this spelled out, in the case of lay owners this is not so obvious.

The only other point to note in this connexion is that wholly saleable divided villis are more likely to occur in the northern half of the county, whereas partially saleable ones are more evenly distributed. Thus, of the fifty in the former category, only twelve (24%) are in the Aylesbury/Chiltern/Ashendon triple Hundreds, whereas 21 of the latter (44%) lie in this region. Earlier studies of the manor and the demesne in late eleventh-century Bucks. have shown that there is a significant north-

south divide in the type of manor and the nature of the demesne.⁵¹ It seems that the tendency for fragmentation of ownership is also different, in that when hitherto unitary estates broke up in the north, many more of the entities thus created were freely disposable. The concentration of such places in the north-east of the county (18 out of 50 in the Newport Hundreds) suggests that this owes much to the influence of Danish settlement and legal structures, even if the area was soon under English rule. (Eleven of the 46 'partly saleable' divided villis are also in this area.) In Burnham Hundred, Amersham and Chesham are much divided. In the former, the largest unit of 7.5 hides was a *manerium*, the other five merely half-hide 'farms' belonging to named individuals, and all saleable. At Chesham, three parts were saleable, including the largest of 8.5 hides, which had ceased to be a manor since 1066. This mixed pattern is repeated in other hundreds, such as Ashendon, Mursley and Stotfold, and may well reflect separate settlements lumped together under the same name in the Domesday survey, rather than the breaking-up of hitherto unified ownerships.

Examples of this phenomenon include Quanton, where the principal estate, assessed at 7.5 hides and with the M rubric, could not be sold, while the remaining 2.5 hides, held *pro uno manerio*, were saleable. The five hides at neighbouring Shortley were divided into one, saleable hide, with no indication of manorial status, and four, 'held as one manor', which were not. Swanbourne offers an example of greater complexity: the king's estate 'answered for' 4.5 hides, and could not be sold; the second portion was divided in 1066 between Bricwin, a king's thegn (4.5 hides) and Ælmer, Harold's man (1.5), both of whom could sell. This estate had ceased to be a manor between 1066 and 1086. Swanbourne 3 was also divided in 1066, between Ælfward, a thegn (4.75 hides) and Alwin, Ælfward's man (2.75). Both could sell, and the estate was held 'as one manor'. Swanbourne 4 was merely a quarter-hide held by Oswy, who could sell, while the final entry under this name was two hides, held by Swein, Asgar the Staller's man, who was prohibited from selling. This property had also lost manorial status since 1066.⁵² All of this seems a far cry from what was probably once a unitary, royal estate of twenty hides, but which had clearly been subject to vari-

ous forces encouraging disintegration. The process had not gone so far in nearby Stewkley. Here there were two estates, each of 3.5 hides, both held 'as one manor' by king's thegns. Wulfward Cild's portion could not be sold, whereas that of Brictric could.

North of the Ouse, Biddlesden 1 (a *Manerium*) assessed at 4.25 hides and held TRE by Azor, another king's thegn, was not saleable, while Biddlesden 2, 0.75 hides held by Alric, Alwin's man, was. Like Oswy's land at Swanbourne, this seems to represent a small farm, probably worked by a single family, which may have been outside any communal agrarian arrangements, for example a woodland clearance. This practice, well-known after 1100 as assarting, was commonplace, and one of the ways in which some men were able to retain a greater degree of freedom than the general run of the peasantry.

VII

As so often in Domesday Book, 'less is more' when it comes to a consideration of the seemingly innocuous words *vendere potuit*. Although the very idea of relatively small landowners being able to dispose freely of their land was anathema to the new order, it seems that in Bucks. and its neighbours, the fact of its existence in 1066 was something to be noted, possibly in relation to possible legal claims. About half of the county in terms of hidage assessment enjoyed this status, while virtually no land was specifically noted as not being saleable. It is not clear, however, on what terms this land was held – by charter, by lease, or by inheritance from 'free' ancestors. It seems likely that there are many missing charter grants for

Bucks., but that leasing was not so important. In the area within and close to the Danelaw, there may have been a legacy of relative freedom from overlordship.

The phenomenon of soke is hardly apparent in Bucks., with less than fifty men considered to be subject to that kind of jurisdiction in 1066. There are, however, the ranks of 'minor' thegns, groups of whom are scattered across the central and northern parts of the county, and who were obviously very different from the 'classic' thegn of the sources, with his often substantial holdings, subordinate tenantry and military obligations. The 'minor' thegn was a freeman, and possibly also a sokeman, and may have been the victim of the laws of inheritance. Given the relative richness of the terminology available to describe the sorts and conditions of men in the late-eleventh century, the choice of 'thegn' for such people is clearly intended to highlight their links with the Anglo-Saxon, rather than the Anglo-Scandinavian, order. They may, however, owe their ability to sell to the spread of Danish influence away from its core area east of Watling Street (witness the Old Norse element in personal- and place-names in west Herts. and Bucks.). Whatever advantages accrued to those who could sell or grant their lands freely in 1066, they had lost them within the following twenty years. Some managed to retain control, albeit under a new, almost always alien overlord, who exacted rents and/or services for the privilege. Others, already very close to the peasantry in terms of wealth, if not status, found themselves falling in with the villeins they may once have used on their land. The loss at Hastings had far-reaching repercussions for the small landowners just as much as it did for their superiors.

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