

# WYCOMBE HEATH AND THE LONDONERS' CHASE

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*In Wycombe Heath and its 'Charter', Records 36 (1994), John Chenevix Trench and the author explored the history of Wycombe Heath and analysed an 'Ancient Charter' which claimed to set out the bounds of the Heath. Further research concludes that the bounds define not only a heath, but a hunting chase on part of what used to be a royal Anglo-Saxon estate, which was also used by the citizens of London in the Anglo-Saxon and early Norman periods, later reverting to being an ordinary common run by landowners and commoners.*

## INTRODUCTION

Local memory retains hardly a trace of Wycombe Heath, yet it was still a very significant element in the Chilterns landscape only 150 years ago, covering nearly 4,000 acres, about four miles long and averaging two miles wide. Bryant's map of 1824 clearly shows the extent of the Heath. Its northern perimeter reached right up to Great Kingshill, with 'ends' marked by Widmer End, Heath End, Spurlands End, Beamond End and Mop End, to which can be added Tyler End to the south, since the earlier name for Tylers Green was Tyler End Green until the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1).

The northern half was indeed heathland, described in 1794 as '1,500 acres, the soil is various, loam, clay flints, gravel etc upon which grow furze, fern, brambles and trees of no value.'<sup>1</sup> The southern half, south of the main road from Amersham to High Wycombe (the modern A404), was wood pasture, and this included King's Wood and St John's Wood in Wycombe parish, and Common Wood and Penn Wood in Penn parish, where seigneurial control had been effective and trees had been fostered. Wood pasture provided a much more open landscape of pollarded and standard trees than we see today and was used for grazing animals, including pigs (Fig. 2).

Seven surrounding parishes shared rights of common. They were: Penn, Amersham, Little Missenden, Great Missenden, Hughenden, Wycombe and Wendover, the latter included because much of the area to the north of the Heath around Kingshill and Peterley was a detached part of the manor (Fig. 3).

In the course of an Inquiry into rights of common in 1666, an 'Ancient Charter' was quoted. It was undoubtedly a fabrication, but included a recitation of the bounds of the Heath which were at first mystifying, but which research has shown to be entirely accurate, albeit corrupted to some degree by centuries of oral transmission.

The charter describes the bounds of the Heath as follows:

*Hasselmere, widdmere End and Niminge Chase watts Hatch Hollmers hatch Loxepyines hatch wheldens hatch Samsons hatch with winsmere hill Gawdes takes and so as the way leadeth to woods heeves lyeing and beinge towards the Gatestakes of Pennbury the Manor of Sir Roger Atte Penn Knight Rogmansham hatch garrett green Colmorham, Donon feeiles hatch Totteridge hatch Crendens hatch with Hassellmere.<sup>2</sup>*

These bounds appear to have been first committed to writing in c. 1400 from a considerably older oral tradition and take account of a significant, probably late 13th-century encroachment when the manor house of Penn (Pennbury Manor in the Charter bounds, now Penn House) was moved from what is now Penbury Farm, near Penn Church on the Penn-Beaconsfield road, to the more spacious surroundings of the Heath. The present village of Penn Street was still a part of the Heath (Fig. 2).

It seems probable that the bounds are taken from an Anglo-Saxon charter with later interpolations to bring them up to date, since the *donon* of *Donon feeiles* is probably OE *thanon*, usually rendered



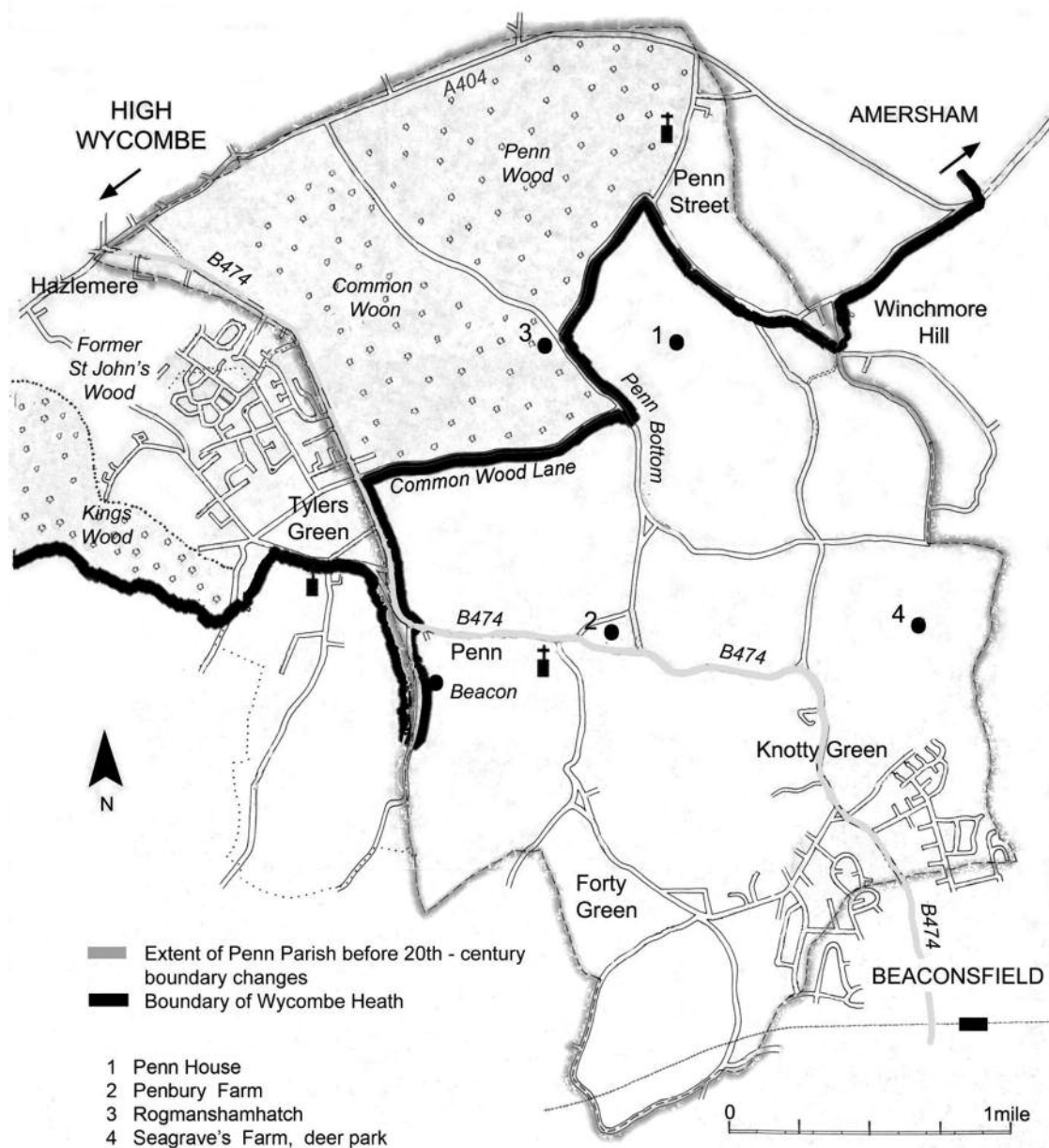


FIGURE 2 The southern boundary of Wycombe Heath

that gave entrance to a forest or park.<sup>6</sup> There is also a specific reference to a chase in one of the bounds, *Niminge Chase*, which means a part of a chase that has been taken in or enclosed, from O.E. *niming* or *inning*.<sup>7</sup> Ninneywood Farm near Heath End has been proposed as the location of this bound.<sup>8</sup>

Domesday Book tells us almost nothing about London, but we do know that the wealth of Saxon London meant that the City's support was of vital importance to the Conqueror, as it had been to his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, and that between 1067–1075 he issued a writ in Old English





FIGURE 3 The seven surrounding parishes sharing rights of common on Wycombe Heath



FIGURE 4 A section of the southern boundary bank of Wycombe Heath along Common Wood Lane



FIGURE 5 View of the southern boundary bank of Wycombe Heath above Mickelfield



confirming the City's laws and customs as they had been in King Edward's time.<sup>9</sup> A charter of Henry I, issued between 1130–33, set out the special rights and privileges of the citizens of London including *'And the citizens may have their chaces to hunt as well and fully as their ancestors have had, that is to say in Chiltre and in Middlesex and Surrey'*.<sup>10</sup> There has been much debate about the authenticity of Henry I's charter since no original exists and it is unexpectedly generous to the citizens in reducing their taxes, but an authoritative analysis concludes that the original text dates from before 1155, and there is no reason to doubt that the customs set out reflect genuine City practice.<sup>11</sup> The Londoners' right was endorsed by Henry II's charter of 1155 which said *'they shall have their chases wherever they had them in the time of King Henry, my grandfather'*.<sup>12</sup>

No claim has yet been made as to where the Chiltern chase was, but the charter's place-name evidence indicates that Wycombe Heath was a chase and there is nowhere in the Chilterns more conveniently placed for a chase for Londoners in terms of its terrain, with its mixture of woodland and heath similar to that of Windsor Forest, and its location, with access either via the Thames or thirty miles along the London-Oxford-Woodstock road to Beaconsfield. The geological survey map demonstrates that Wycombe Heath occupied a large, riverless space on clay-with-flints, which was consequently unattractive to early settlers and so particularly suitable as a common and as a hunting chase (Fig. 6). Most forests and chases had common rights dating from before they had been declared Forests or chases.<sup>13</sup>

It may be significant that the Londoners' charter of 1130–33 referred to Chiltern rather than to Buckinghamshire, suggesting that their claim preceded the first reference to Buckinghamshire in 1014. The specific location of Londoners' hunting rights in the Chilterns, Middlesex and Surrey calls for some explanation, and Keith Bailey has suggested a clue may lie in the early 10th-century memorandum recording the measures taken for the execution of King Athelstan's (924–39) decrees by a body described as a *'peace-gild'*, of which the leading members were the bishops and reeves belonging to London. Sir Frank Stenton observed that the ordinary members of the gild were the countrymen of a region which certainly included all Middlesex, and may also have comprised Surrey

and part of Hertfordshire.<sup>14</sup>

When these hunting rights first originated it is not possible to say. Margaret Gelling proposed a sixth/seventh-century Middle Saxon kingdom, which included the Buckinghamshire Chilterns, Middlesex and Surrey.<sup>15</sup> However, Keith Bailey has disputed this proposal and he also makes the point that the London-Chiltern connection cannot be as early as the seventh century, since London was then still only a trading centre around Aldwych with the seat of the bishop and the King of Kent's hall inside the Roman walls.<sup>16</sup>

The right to keep deer and to hunt did not necessarily imply ownership of the land. There could be a further two parties involved, each with their own rights – the landowners and the commoners.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Wycombe Heath, there is no record in subsequent centuries that the Londoners ever made any claim to ownership of the land.

#### A ROYAL ANGLO-SAXON ESTATE

The Wycombe Heath chase lay at the centre of the Chiltern region which Domesday Book entries suggest was a large royal Anglo-Saxon estate in the process of being fragmented to provide land for their supporters. Before the Conquest, Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, held Amer-sham and Hughenden and her man held High Wycombe; King Edward held Wendover and his thane held Great Missenden; Earl/King Harold's man held Penn (as a part of Taplow). Only Little Missenden of the seven vills surrounding the Heath had no declared royal connection.<sup>18</sup> Thus immediately before the Conquest, it would seem that the Londoners' hunting rights were exercised on a royal estate.

Surviving records are so few that it is not possible to be certain how long the land had been in royal hands, but there is firm evidence of earlier royal ownership in the Chiltern Hundreds. When King Alfred of Wessex made his will between 879–88, it included a so far unidentified Burnham which he left to his nephew and for which the Buckinghamshire Burnham must be a strong candidate.<sup>19</sup> Alfred instructed that all his booklands should be kept in his family, preferably in the male line.<sup>20</sup> In 1014 one of his descendants, the Atheling Athelstan, eldest son of King Ethelred, made his will in which he besought his father to confirm his bequests of his estate at Marlow, which he had

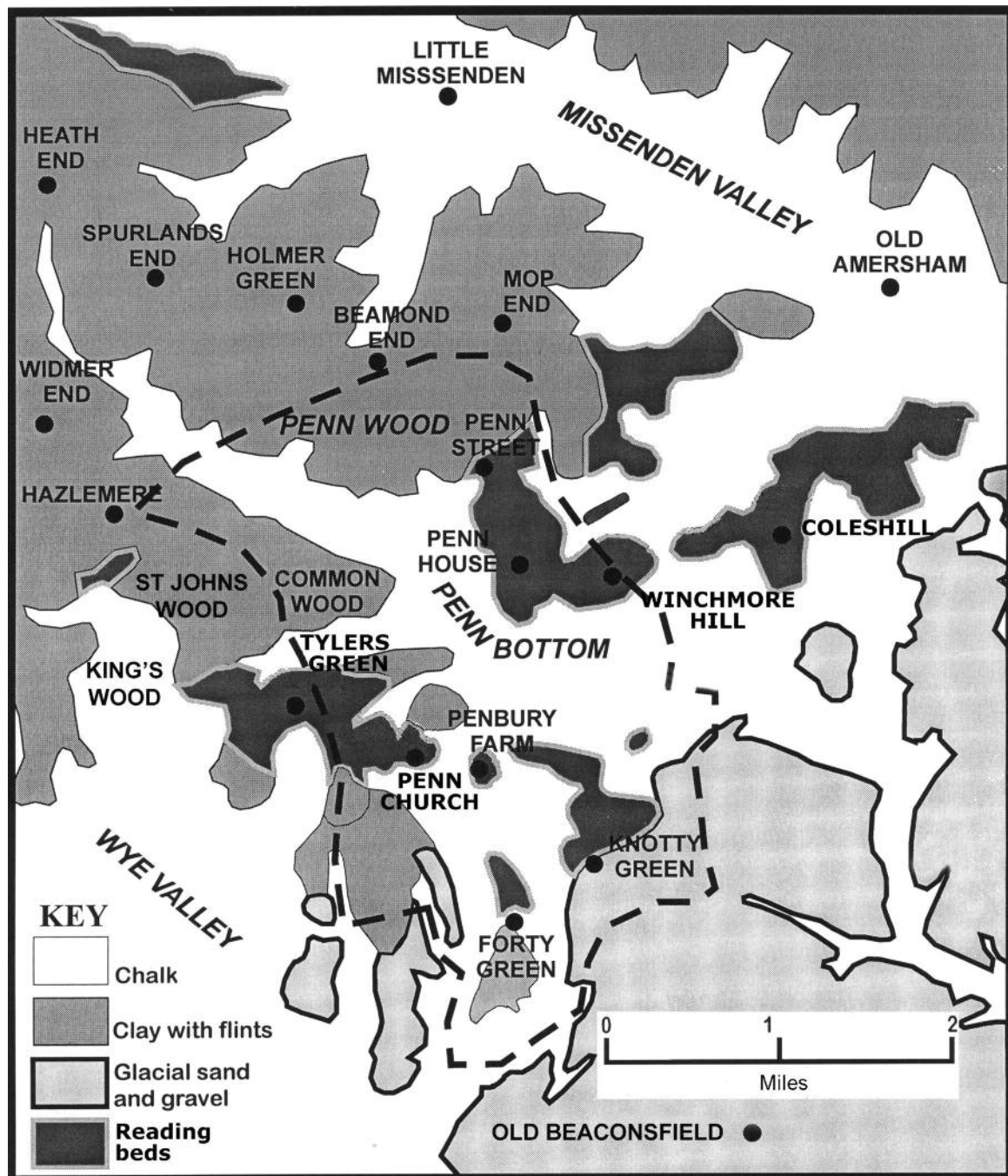


FIGURE 6 Geology of Wycombe Heath adapted from O.S.Sheet 255, Beaconsfield, 1:50,000

bought from his father for 250 mancuses of gold, to the church where he was to be buried, and of an estate at a hitherto unidentified Hambleden to Elfmaer who already held it.<sup>21</sup> Arnold Baines has firmly identified Athelstan's Hambleden with the Buckinghamshire parish of Hambleden on the Thames close to Marlow.<sup>22</sup> It would seem significant that these two estates were much the largest of the very few in the Chiltern Hundreds that had no royal connection in 1066.

Saxon kings, like most of their subjects, were dedicated huntsmen and several places in neighbouring Oxfordshire and Berkshire have been identified as royal hunting grounds<sup>23</sup>. It seems probable that Wycombe Heath was as well. Rackham points out that Anglo-Saxons had neither forests nor chases with special laws, nor any word for them (both are Old French words). They hunted, but exercised no more than the sporting rights of any landowner. It was the Conqueror who imported the concept of forests in which land was designated specifically for hunting and where the deer were protected.<sup>24</sup>

#### AFTER THE CONQUEST

Rackham also observes that the word 'forest' is first mentioned in Domesday Book, which records about twenty-five of them. Where they existed they were recorded systematically as one of the main objects of Domesday was to define the king's rights where they were liable to conflict with those of his subjects.<sup>25</sup> Domesday makes no reference to the post-Conquest Wycombe Heath as a forest and it also makes it clear that the Buckinghamshire Chilterns were no longer a royal estate. It would seem that with a large and growing Forest of Windsor newly established only some ten miles to the south, the Conqueror had no wish to interfere with the Londoners' traditional rights to the chase.

Presumably the Domesday entry for each vill included its share of the valuable woodland of the Heath, but it is, however, surprising that none of the entries for the seven vills surrounding the Heath include any reference to wood pasture (*silva pastilis*), often mentioned elsewhere in Domesday Book, or to wood pasture common (*communi silva pascuale*).<sup>26</sup> The earliest reference to its use as common was in an agreement of c.1203–27 which confirmed the right of adjoining free-holders to pasture on the Heath.<sup>27</sup>

In the Middle Ages at least 26 chases were recorded, but none were noted as being in the Chilterns and it seems likely that the Heath never was a chase in the strictly legal post-Conquest use of the term. Chase was also used in the more general sense of going hunting and the Londoners' much older claim to their traditional rights may have been of that kind.

Assarting of the upland Heath was taking place before the Conquest and continued for two centuries thereafter, but it is noteworthy that assarts seem to have been almost entirely restricted to the north and east of the chase, outside its bounds.<sup>28</sup> *Niminge Chase* was presumably so called because it stood out as an exception to the rule, and since 'chase' is an Old French word which would not have been used by the Saxons, its use demonstrates the post-Conquest existence of the Chase.

Elsewhere, a steady flow of fines for assarts in Forests was evident within a century of Domesday and this became a veritable flood within a few years of the death of Henry II in 1189. In 1235, the Statute of Merton established the principle that the waste of a manor was the waste of its lord, providing he left sufficient pasture for his free tenants' needs. In 1285, another statute extended these provisions to cover commons shared between neighbouring manors or vills.<sup>29</sup> These two statutes were a turning point in the fortunes of forests and chases and erosion by assarting increased still further thereafter.<sup>30</sup> In the particular case of Wycombe Heath, the major encroachment by the landowner, represented by Penn House, would seem to belong to this late thirteenth-century period.<sup>31</sup> The Heath, as was typical elsewhere, reverted to being an ordinary common run by landowners and commoners.<sup>32</sup>

The citizens of London were still claiming their ancient hunting rights at the London Eyre of 1321, but where they were hunting was not specified. In 1379, there is a reference to an officer in the Mayor's household called Common Hunt who was responsible for organising the hunting and fishing for the 'commonality' or citizens at large.<sup>33</sup>

#### FURTHER PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

In addition to *Niminge Chase*, there are two place-names which, it is suggested, can reasonably be interpreted as supporting the presence of a chase:



## Penn

The earliest references to Penn as a place-name are late 12<sup>th</sup> century, and nearly all refer to the place as La Penna and to the manorial family as de la Penna.<sup>34</sup> This form lasted for more than 300 years after the Conquest. Norman scribes translated the name as Penna because Saxons pronounced the second 'n' as a separate syllable. Thus a Saxon resident would have said he came from The Pen-ne.<sup>35</sup> The use of the definite article La (presumably Penna was assumed to be feminine) could imply a reference to a particular place or feature. Place-name experts are agreed that it is impossible to distinguish etymologically between the earlier British *penn*, head, hill, end, promotory and OE *penn*, pen for animals, enclosure, and that local knowledge of the ground has to be the deciding factor.<sup>36</sup>

Margaret Gelling favoured a British origin, but this can only be on the assumption that Penn was the earlier name for today's Beacon Hill since there are no summits of any kind in the parish which is part of a steady climb from the Thames Valley to the edge of the Aylesbury Vale. The beacon site is not even the highest point in the parish and was chosen because its position halfway along a southerly spur allows long distance views and links with other beacon sites. Whilst the topographical case for a British *penn* cannot be ruled out, it is not a strong one, and is further weakened by the knowledge that Beaconsfield took its name from the beacon at Penn.<sup>37</sup> Beaconsfield is so close to Taplow with its c.600 pagan burials, that it seems likely to have been named in the earliest days of Anglo-Saxon settlement when it is believed there was still a surviving British presence in the Chiltern Hills from whom to inherit an earlier name.<sup>38</sup>

The case for the OE meaning of *penn* as an enclosure for animals is a stronger one. It fits well with the idea of Anglo-Saxon kings and the citizens of London enclosing deer in 'The Penna' in order to hunt them on the wider heath. The discussion of Rogmansham hatch which follows adds substance to this argument.

### Rogmansham hatch

This interesting name appears in the Ancient Charter as the bound of the Heath somewhere close to where Penn Bottom meets the post-enclosure New Road to Penn Street. In 1994, we tentatively

proposed an underlying meaning of *Ruh merscum*, 'at the rough marshes'.<sup>39</sup> However, there are no marshes and it is now clear that there is a far more relevant possibility. The proposed derivation is from OE *rah-gemæne-ham*, *haecc*.<sup>40</sup> In other words, 'gate (typically to a forest or chase) at the hamlet by the roe deer common, an extraordinarily precise description. The most likely site for such a hamlet is what is now called Lions Farm (Fig. 2).

Oliver Rackham reported finding six Anglo-Saxon references to roe [deer] hedges and remarked how hard these nocturnal creatures were to confine and manage. They were a major source of food, appearing on medieval royal menus such as Henry III's Christmas dinner in 1251 which included 200 roe deer. Venison was regarded as a special dish for feasts and the honouring of guests. It was beyond price.<sup>41</sup> Red and roe deer were the two deer hunted in Anglo-Saxon times and roe were generally the most numerous in the two centuries before the Conquest. They were predominantly a woodland species and were particularly difficult to confine.

Rogmansham hatch and the deer park around Seagrave's Farm, less than two miles away (Fig. 2), are both in the parish of Penn and were once part of the same Anglo-Saxon royal Burnham estate.<sup>42</sup> It is now increasingly the view that that hunting *par force de chiens* (the chasing down of a single deer over the course of a day and its ritualistic killing and dismemberment) was simply impossible within the comparatively restricted confines of a park (the Seagrave's Farm park was 150 acres). More probably, animals were steered towards stationary hunters armed with bows and in pre-prepared positions or hides.<sup>43</sup>

In this light one can see the 'roe-deer common' as the part of the Heath with an enclosure, perhaps temporary, to which deer were transported from the park around Seagrave's Farm when a hunt over the whole 4,000 acre Heath was arranged. Recent thinking supports this idea proposing intermittent boundary structures rather than continuous enclosures.<sup>44</sup> The surviving evidence of a significant bank to the south of Common Wood and a well-preserved bank with internal ditch to the south and west of Kings Wood suggests that deer would have had a free run only towards the open Heath to the north. The parish name 'Penn' can perhaps be seen as reflecting this important deer-enclosing function for the royal estate.

This explanation for Rogmansham might seem too convenient and contrived, but many of the place-names in the Charter, which were at first mystifying, have proved extraordinarily accurate despite many centuries of probable oral transmission, as well as being unexpectedly informative. For instance, *Loxepyines* was convincingly explained as *Lacus Pines*, a Latin version of Pines Pits, one of the common fields of Woodrow; *woods heeves* turned out to be woods' eaves, the edge of Penn Wood; *Garrett Green*, a completely forgotten name, was confirmed by field names as well as manorial records to have been the name of the strip of common land on which the Penn beacon stood;<sup>45</sup> *Colmorham*, another forgotten name, has been convincingly proposed as an earlier name for Tylers Green before the 14th-century tilers dominated the parish.<sup>46</sup> *Donon feeiles*, taking Keith Bailey's advice that *donon* is probably OE *thanon*, gives us 'and so to the fields'. The fields just east of Kings Wood are still there and were already ploughed in the late 12th century. These bounds, revised since our 1994 *Records* article, are shown in Fig. 2. *Rogmansham* is probably the most complex name of them all, but one can readily see *rah-gemæneham* becoming Rogmansham – especially with a Sir Roger present elsewhere in the Charter bounds.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### NOTES

- 1 William James and Jacob Malcolm, *General View of Agriculture in the county of Buckingham* (1794), 35.
- 2 John Chenevix Trench & Miles Green, "Wycombe Heath and its 'Charter'", *Recs Bucks* 36 (1994), 148–9.
- 3 I am indebted to Keith Bailey for this very valuable suggestion.

- 4 John Chenevix Trench & Miles Green, *op. cit.*
- 5 Oliver Rackham, *The history of the countryside* (1986), 131.
- 6 E. Ekwall, *The concise English Dictionary of English Place Names* (Oxford 1960), 224, Hatch, 'a gate, esp. in or leading to a forest', OE *haecc*.
- 7 P.H. Reaney, *The origin of English place-names* (1964), 111, 213.
- 8 John Chenevix Trench & Miles Green, *op. cit.*, 151.
- 9 *English Historical Documents* II, 945.
- 10 W. de Gray Birch, *The historical charters of the City of London* (1887), III, 4.
- 11 C.N.L. Brooke 'Henry I's charter for the City of London', *J Society Archivists*, IV.7, April 1973.
- 12 *English Historical Documents* II, 1012–14.
- 13 Oliver Rackham, *op. cit.*, (1986), 133.
- 14 Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford 1971, Third edition)*, 354–5. Full text of the memorandum, *English Historical Documents* I, 423–7.
- 15 Margaret Gelling, *Place-names of Berkshire*, III (1976), 839
- 16 Keith Bailey, 'The Middle Saxons', Steven Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester 1989), 108–122; and personal communication.
- 17 Oliver Rackham, *op. cit.*, 133.
- 18 John Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book, 13, Buckinghamshire* (1978).
- 19 There is a detailed discussion of the evidence for a royal estate at Burnham in Miles Green, 'A deer park at Seagrave's Farm, Penn', *Recs Bucks*, this volume
- 20 D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents c.500–1042*, I, (2nd ed., 1979), 536–7.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 593–5.
- 22 Arnold Baines, 'Hambleton the bent valley', *Recs Bucks* 37 (1995), 138.
- 23 John Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud 1994), 108–10, and Della Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon settlements* (1988), 147.
- 24 Oliver Rackham, *op. cit.*, 130–1.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 26 Oliver Rackham, *op. cit.*, 120–1. John Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book, Buckinghamshire* (1978).
- 27 PRO E40/404.
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- 30 *Ibid.* 35; Oliver Rackham, *op.cit.*, 138.
- 31 John Chenevix Trench and Miles Green, *op.cit.*, 153, 156.
- 32 Oliver Rackham, *op.cit.*, 138.
- 33 Private letter of 1 Aug 1995 from J.R. Sewell, City Archivist, Corporation of London Records Office.
- 34 e.g. Missenden Cartulary, III, 713, James & Walter de la Penna in 1194.
- 35 Conversation with Dr Arnold Baines.
- 36 Margaret Gelling, *Place names in the Landscape* (Oxford 1984), 124, 182–3; Eilert Ekwall, *The concise English Dictionary of English Place Names* (1960), 361–2.
- 37 W.F.H. Nicolaisen, Margaret Gelling, Melville Richards, *The names of towns and cities in Britain*, (Batsford 1970), 43, specifically names the Penn beacon as the source of the name and Margaret Gelling confirmed in conversation with me in 1995 that was still her view; Ekwall, *op.cit.*, 32.
- 38 Leslie W. Hepple & Alison M. Doggett, *The Chilterns* (Chichester 1994), 52–3.
- 39 John Chenevix Trench & Miles Green, *op.cit.*, 152, 155.
- 40 Ekwall, *op.cit.*, 378, OE *rā*, 'roe-deer', in compounds also *rāh-*, as in *rāhhege*, 'deer fence', becomes ME *roh-*; 313, OE *gemæne*, 'common' as in *man grene*, 'common field'; 224, OE *haecc*, 'hatch', a gate, esp. in or leading to a forest. Keith Bailey has suggested that Rogmansham could be a garbled version of Agmondesham, an earlier form of Amersham, but recognizes that this does not fit with the normal clockwise perambulation.
- 41 Oliver Rackham, *op.cit.*, 39, 49, 119, 125, 185.
- 42 See fn.19 above.
- 43 Robert Liddiard, *The Medieval Park: New Perspectives* (Macclesfield 2007), 4, 5.
- 44 Naomi Sykes, 'Animal bones and animal parks', *The Medieval Park; New Perspectives*, Robert Liddiard (ed.), (2007), 60–1.
- 45 John Chenevix Trench and Miles Green, *op.cit.*, 151–2. Keith Bailey has pointed out that it is an OFr word with the earliest citation in OED as 1340, and is therefore a later interpolation in the bounds.
- 46 Miles Green, 'Colmorham', *Village Voice* No 142, Feb. 2011, 11–12. The place-name elements allow a variety of meanings: hill/moor/hamlet, hill/boundary/hamlet, hill/pond/hamlet, all of which fit the topography.