

Vestiges of the Norman Conquest of Somerset.

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IN the ruined condition of the towns of Shaftesbury, Wareham, Dorchester, and Bridport, as recorded in Domesday, Mr. Freeman traces William the Conqueror's line of march ("a line of march which, as usual with him, was marked by ravage"¹), when, early in the year 1068, he came westward to the siege of Exeter. In the following pages I have attempted, by means of the same kind of evidence, to trace the military movements of William's reign in our own county.

Of the first appearance of the Normans in this county, and of its submission, we have no account; but we are told that in the autumn of 1069 the men of Devonshire rose and made an attack upon Exeter, which had submitted to William in the previous year; and that the men of Somerset also rose against the Normans, and attacked the newly built castle of Robert of Mortain, at Montacute. With the view of seeing whether Domesday might not furnish us with some of the details, either of the 1st Conquest, or of this rising in Somerset, I marked upon a map those manors which are stated in Domesday to have decreased in value, between the time of Edward the Confessor and its own date, 1086. A glance at a map thus marked, shows that these impoverished manors are not scattered haphazard throughout the country, (as probably would be the case if their condition had depended upon the character of the particular lord, or upon any other accidental cause), but that they fall into two tolerably well-defined lines. One of these lines begins at the north-east corner of the county, runs down the eastern boundary as far as the neighbourhood of Wincanton, and thence turns off,

(1). E. A. Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, vol. iv., pp. 150, 151.

almost at a right angle, across the county to a point a few miles west of Langport. Here it again turns southwards, and spreads out, and loses itself among a number of manors, more or less ruined, upon the western side of Montacute.

The other line keeps pretty closely to the northern coast all the way from Bristol to Porlock, with the exception of two incursions a few miles inland—one in the valley of the Axe, and its neighbourhood, the other near the estuary of the Parret.

Before coming to that which I venture to offer as a possible explanation of these facts, it will be well to notice that Domesday proves that the tendency of the county generally had been very decidedly towards an increase of value since the days of Edward the Confessor: *e.g.*, of 922 manors in the county, 516—*i.e.*, about 56 %—are of the same value in 1086 as they were in 1066. 272 manors—*i.e.*, about 30 %—have increased in value; while only 134—*i.e.*, rather more than 14 %—have decreased. This growth in value is shown in a very marked manner in the three very small manors of Edmundsworth, Donesumba, and Aisseford; “penitus vastatæ T.R.E.,” they have become worth 25s., 2s., and 3s., respectively, in Domesday. The average of increase again in actual value is more than double the average of decrease, *viz.*, 74 % in the one case, compared with 32 % in the other.

With so much of preface, I would now attempt to point out in detail the explanation of these facts which I suggest, *viz.*, that these lines of devastation mark the steps of the Norman forces, or of other warlike movements; and thus supply some portions of the story of the conquest of our county which do not appear in the Chronicles.

The usual authorities are very concise indeed in their account of the rising in the West, and of its suppression. (“We have no details of the march or of the operations of the warlike prelate, Bishop Geoffry,” says Mr. Freeman, vol. iv. p. 278.) They only tell us that the West Saxons of Somerset, Dorset, and the neighbouring districts, besieged the castle of Montacute, and that Bishop Geoffry of Coutances brought down

to the relief of Montacute, the men of London, Winchester, and Salisbury ; and that he slew some of the English, mutilated his prisoners, and put the rest to flight.

The Domesday valuations may supply some of the details of these operations ; for the Norman forces, no doubt, in this case as at other times, would follow their usual tactics, and would seek to strike terror by unsparing rigour, destroying all before them as they marched. Upon the news of the outbreak reaching London the troops probably at once moved down upon the disturbed district by the shortest route. Such a line would bring them at once upon the north-east boundary of the county, upon the very point where a cluster of damaged manors, all lying close together, is found. And it is remarkable that six of these manors, viz., Charterhouse Hinton, Farleigh, Telsford, Road, Beckington, and Standerwick, all lie upon the actual boundary of the county at this point ; while upon the Wiltshire side there are no such traces of destruction, except in the one manor of Maiden Bradley, which lies some miles away to the south. Apparently, therefore, Wiltshire had taken no part in the rebellion ; and the Normans, (kept in order by the strictness of William's military code which compelled them to carry out his own usual practice—"debonair and mild to those who would do his will, but, beyond measure, stern to all who withstood it"),² marched through the county without doing injury, reserving their severity for the revolted district of Somerset.

The circle of ruin spreads out westward for some eight miles from the boundary at this point where the Norman forces had first struck upon the county, perhaps as far as Midsomer Norton, but the identification of this manor is not quite certain. It also spreads northward, towards and around Bath, and probably includes, together with Bath itself, Combe Hay, South Stoke, Newton St. Loe, and Bath Easton. The other impoverished manors in this district are Woolverton, Buckland, Hemington, Writhlington, Luckington, and perhaps Charlton and Walton.

(2). E. A. Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, vol. iv., p. 30.

It will be noticed that these manors do not all lie contiguous to one another, as might perhaps be expected, if their injuries had been due to the march of an army. Indeed it does not appear that the whole of a manor has always suffered; some portions, as in the case of Road, may show no traces of injury. But even if the destruction were indiscriminate at the time (which may be doubted, for some might escape by timely submission), yet the lapse of so many years, taken in connexion with the general tendency, already noticed, to a considerable increase of prosperity in the county, may have given time to many properties to have recovered themselves, and to have obliterated the traces of their former losses.

From this district, between Bath and Frome, the line now runs directly southwards, through Leigh, Wanstrow, Upton Noble, Batcombe, and Lamyatt, to Bruton; a narrow line which follows very much the course of the present high road—the representative, I believe, of a road as old as the times of the Romans.

In the neighbourhood of Bruton there is a remarkable change in the number and distribution of the impoverished manors. It is no longer a narrow line, or a district with traces of injury remaining here and there; but now, throughout a stretch of country measuring some ten miles by eight, and containing about twenty-two manors, there is only one (Wincanton) which does not appear in the list of sufferers. The names of these manors are Pen, Charlton, Cucklington, Cheriton, Maperton, Holton, Clapton, Shepton Montague, Bratton, Stony Stoke, Redlinch, Pitcombe, Castle Cary, Yarlinton, Woolston, North Cadbury, Blackford, Compton Pauncefoot, Almsford, Barrow, and Bruton.

This district, a broken, hilly country, lies immediately upon the border of the county, towards its south-east corner. It is close upon Selwood Forest, and may have formed a part of it: at any rate, at the time of Domesday it contained a considerable quantity of wood, "*silva minuta*." It may be noticed, also, that it lies just below the ridge of Pen and Stour Head, where

Alfred gathered his men for the great fight at Æthandun. May it not be that the men of Somerset had again chosen this as a place of gathering; a district peculiarly well suited to their undisciplined forces, as against the horsemen and regular soldiers of the Normans? The position would also have the additional advantage of being upon the direct line from Salisbury to the West, and thus of barring the way to a Norman army advancing from Salisbury to the relief of Montacute.

While, then, the London men were engaged towards the northern part of county, but making their way down, in order to form a junction with the forces which had marched from Winchester and Salisbury, this latter army had already met with the enemy at the south-east portion of the county. Marching by the shortest route from Salisbury, they had come upon the southern side of the district held by the rebels, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Cucklington, and across to Maperton, Compton, and Cadbury. The extent of the country devastated, and the fact that no one manor had recovered, even after eighteen years of peace, seem to argue that the whole district was strongly held by the English, and that the struggle here was a severe one. An attack upon this south-eastern side would cut off the natural line of retreat for the English towards Sherborne, and Yeovil; and, (supposing that the passage of the river at Ilchester were held by the Normans, as it probably would be,) would force them back towards the enemy coming down from Bath, and compel them to take the line of retreat marked out for us by the destruction wrought in the manors of Castle Cary, Barrow, Alford, Lovington, Wheathill, the two Farringdons in Babcary, Lydford, Keinton, Barton St. David, Compton Dundon, the Charltons, High Ham, Aller, and Burton. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of Burton, west of Langport, where they had crossed the river, the retreating English would join with those who had been engaged in the siege of Montacute. And here it would appear that the rebellion was finally crushed, with heavy losses to the manors of Thorn, Stoke, Chinnock, Merriet, Cudworth, Sutton,

Dowlish, Donyatt, Seavington, White Lackington, Shepton Beauchamp, the Bradons, Isle Brewers, Beer, and Hatch Beauchamp.

The only one of the impoverished manors of this eastern and southern part of the county not accounted for above, is part of Henstridge. This, however, lies some miles away, and may well have suffered its losses during William's march upon Exeter, if they may not be attributed to any other cause.

The second part of my subject, that which deals with the evidences of destruction upon the northern coast, has the support of clear historical statements; and these fit in so readily with the position of the ruined manors along the coast, as recorded in Domesday, that they afford a good deal of support to the view, that war, and the harrings which accompanied war, and not merely neglect or bad management, were the cause of the impoverished condition of the manors mentioned in the first part. Domesday and the Chronicles tell us the same thing. "Hæ ix predictæ mansiones sunt vastatæ per Irlandinos homines," says Exon Domesday, speaking of certain manors in Devonshire. And then we are told by historians, that in the year 1052, Harold and Leofwine returned from exile in Ireland, with nine ships; that they landed at Porlock, defeated the men of the two shires of Devon and Somerset, "plundered without opposition, and carried off what they would in the way of goods, cattle, and men."³

The losses however suffered by Allerford, Doverhay, Holnecot (and perhaps Knolle), in the immediate neighbourhood of Porlock, and by Porlock itself, as recorded in Domesday, are not, probably, due to this descent by Harold, for the comparison of values in Domesday is between the years 1066 and 1086, but may be attributed to a time some sixteen years later, when, in the year 1068, the sons of Harold, in their turn, following their father's example, came back from Ireland with a fleet of "52 ships, manned, no doubt, partly by Danes from Ireland, partly by

(3). E. A. Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, vol. ii., pp. 313—317.

English exiles.”⁴ “Harrying the coast as they went, they sailed up the Avon to Bristol.” Repulsed by the burghers of Bristol, “but loaded with the spoil which they had gathered in the neighbourhood, they returned to their ships, and sailed to some point of the coast of Somerset, which is not more fully described.” Traces of their handiwork upon the banks of the Avon, and near its mouth, may be seen in the destruction of Ashton, Clapton, Easton, Tickenham, and Walton. The point where they landed, after their retreat from Bristol, may have been upon the Woodspring promontory, between Kingston Seymour and Weston-super-Mare, where the manors of Kewstoke, Ebdon, Worle, Bourton, Hutton, and Elborough, have all suffered. Upon the coast itself, but a little further down, Brean and Burnham (and perhaps Berrow) must be added to the list, and also the inland manors of Wear, Allerton, Cheddar, Wedmore in the valley of the Axe, and Shipham upon the Banwell side of Mendip. Some of these manors lie some miles from the coast, but we should expect to find somewhat widespread evidences of this descent, for the invaders remained long enough to allow of time for a force to be gathered to oppose them : a force, too, composed of men provoked by their ravages to take the part of their Norman masters against their would-be deliverers. At the point where they landed, “the story of their father’s landing at Porlock was acted over again. Under the circumstances of their landing, it is not wonderful that they found the shire unfriendly, or that Eadnoth, once their father’s Staller, preferred his lately sworn allegiance to the Norman king to any feelings of regard to the sons of his old master. Eadnoth, as King William’s officer, met the sons of Harold in arms, at the head of King William’s new subjects, the local *fyrð* of Somerset. Many good men were slain on both sides. The result seems to have been a drawn battle ; Eadnoth fell in the fight. . . . Godwine and his brothers sailed away, and after further harryings in Devonshire and Cornwall, made their way

(4). E. A. Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, vol. iv., p. 225.

back to Ireland.”⁵ But before they sailed quite away there was more harrying and more spoil gathered in the country about the æstuary of the Parret; and Cossington, Pigney, Combwich, Gauthelney, Radlet, Planesfield, Durborough, Stowey, Stoke Courcy, Stringston (and perhaps Knowle, Edington, and Sutton Mallet) had not recovered from the visitation after a lapse of eighteen years. The manors also of Quantoxhead, Carhampton, Timberscombe, and those in the neighbourhood of Porlock, no doubt all met with their misfortunes at this same time.

Quarum upon Exmoor, Middleton, and Brompton Ralph, near the Brendon Hills, though many miles inland, may not have been beyond the reach of those Irish marauders. Brushford and Skilgate, near Dulverton, seem to belong rather to another group, which lies between Dulverton and Exeter. It may be that these had suffered at the hands of William himself, when he besieged Exeter; or it may be that we have in this broken and hilly district, the spot, where, when the rest of the country submitted soon after the battle of Hastings, some few held out for a time against the conqueror, and brought upon their country a punishment from which it had not entirely recovered by the time of Domesday.

(5). E. A. Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, vol. iv., p. 226.