

THE DOMESDAY GEOGRAPHY OF THREE EXMOOR PARISHES

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The main aim of this paper is a detailed examination of the Domesday geography of some parishes in west Somerset on the eastern edge of Exmoor.

The area chosen includes the Domesday manors of Bagley, Stoke Pero, Wilmersham, Culbone, Doverhay and Porlock. These are all small manors, the largest being Porlock where land for twelve teams is recorded in Domesday with six villeins, three bordars and six serfs. Except for Porlock all these manors are entirely within the moorland area and none have nucleated villages as their centres. Culbone and Stoke Pero both have small churches, probably dating from the twelfth century or earlier. In each case the church stands almost alone, and the rest of the settlement consists of isolated farms scattered along the valley sides. Porlock village stands below Exmoor on the edge of the flat fertile plain of Porlock Vale. Besides this concentration of settlement, farms are scattered among the combes in the high land and along the coast of the parish.

Bagley is the only manor of which nothing remains today. In 1086 there were two bordars farming one furlong with half a team, while one furlong and one team were in demesne. There were also 50 acres of pasture and 12 of wood. That such a small establishment, situated in a remote position near the head of a moorland combe, failed to survive may not seem surprising. But it must be remembered that environmental conditions cannot be expected to account for everything. For although Bagley has disappeared, Stoke Pero, only half a mile to the north and in a similar geographical position, has

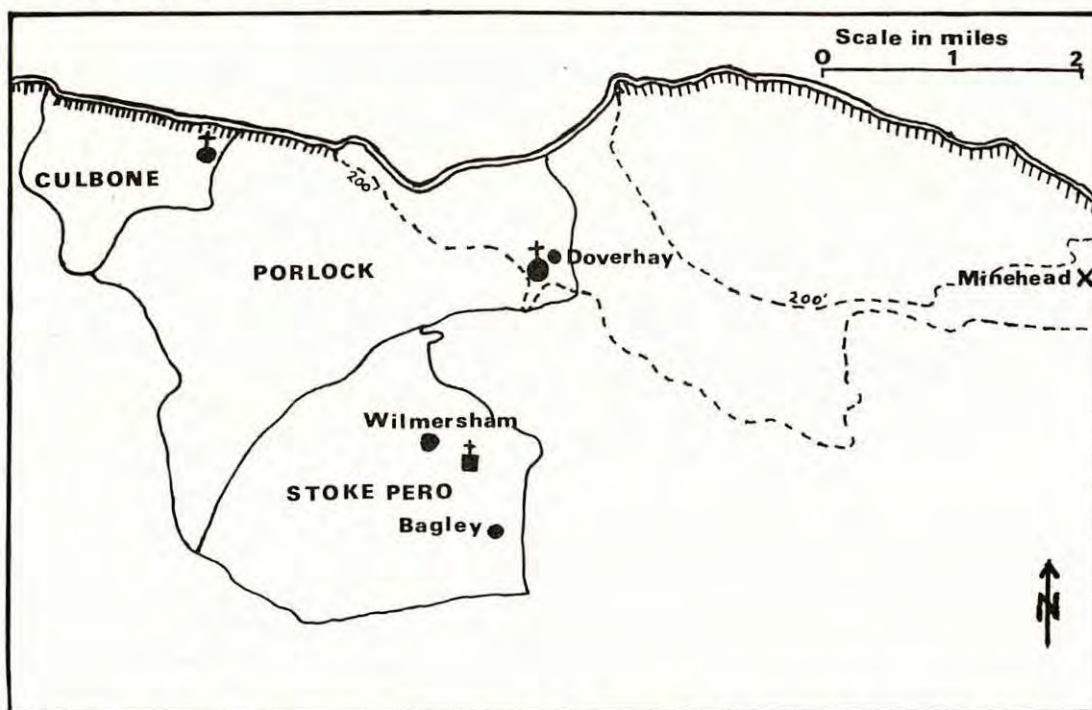


FIG. 1

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Map to show the location and extent of the three Exmoor Parishes considered.

survived in spite of a consistently small population. Some human factor such as the progressive nature and dynamic personality of one of the Pyrhon family holding Stoc¹ may have made the manor a going concern with a permanent foothold and this may have accounted for its survival to the present day. About such personal factors which may account for the building of the church we should like to know more, but unfortunately no record remains.

Porlock and Bagley represent two extremes of settlement in the small region under study, and Wilmersham, Doverhay, Culbone and Stoke Pero fall somewhere in between. All are small enough for us to be able to attempt a detailed study of their condition at Domesday. The accompanying maps show this area as it might have appeared in the 11th century. Although they are in many ways conjectural, there is enough supporting evidence to make them worth compiling.

Maitland's interpretation of areal measurements (which are also accepted by Darby) have been used.² Maitland suggests as a rough guide that one hide equals four virgates equals 120 acres and that one carucate or ploughland equals 8 bovates equals 120 acres. He stresses, however, that ploughlands do not necessarily imply an areal measure. The actual area which one plough team could plough in a day (a carucate) would vary with the type of soil being cultivated. The introduction to the Domesday survey in *The Victoria County History of Devonshire* suggests a measurement as little as 60 to 80 acres. Round, in his introduction to the Somerset Domesday,³ stresses the fact that we cannot use hides and ploughlands as accurate measurements.

While all these reservations are important, it has been thought valuable to attempt generalized maps of the Domesday manors in the three parishes of Culbone, Stoke Pero and Porlock. Ploughland and pasture have been plotted on the basis of one ploughland to just over 100 acres and on the assumption that the Domesday acre is similar to the modern acre. Where it is possible to suggest villein as well as desmesne farms, they are also shown and their cultivated land is marked adjacent to them as would seem likely, given the geographical conditions. Present areas of open unimproved moorland are also shown and the boundary between improved and unimproved land marked. Domesday pasture is classed as improved land and probably in 1086 implied common pasture. Considering the large acreage of pasture mentioned, it would seem that the farming economy then as now relied heavily on sheep and livestock. Forty sheep and thirty goats are recorded on the manor of Wilmersham.

The manor of Bagley is the simplest to show because it is the smallest. Cultivated land around it consisted of only two furlongs and beyond this there were fifty acres of pasture. One furlong of the cultivated land was in demesne while the other had to support the two bordar families who must therefore have relied heavily on the pasture to provide a little extra food. The twelve acres of woodland were probably a little to the east of the existing ruins of Bagley farm where the valley sides still support a stunted growth of oak. Here is an example where medieval cultivation was carried on in an area which has now almost entirely reverted to moorland.

¹ The Pyrhon family are recorded as having had the right of presentation to the living of Stoke Pero from 1242 (see C. E. H. Chadwyck-Healey, *History of Part of West Somerset* (London, 1901), 235). "Stoc": the Domesday spellings are "Stoche" and "Esthoca" (*V.C.H. Som.*, 2, 490).

² F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1897); H. C. Darby, *Domesday Geographies of Eastern England* (Cambridge, 1952).

³ *V.C.H. Som.* 1.

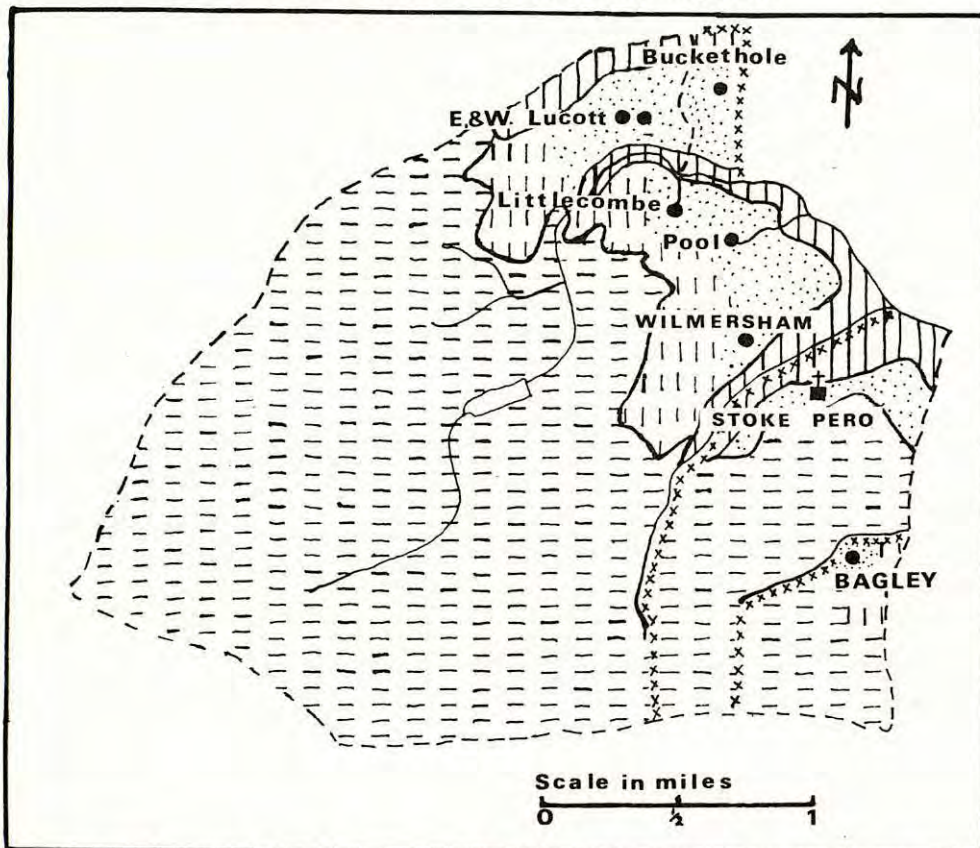


FIG. 2

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The Manors of Bagley, Wilmersham and Stoke Pero in the 11th century.

Domesday entries:

Bagley. Value 3s. 4d.; one furlong cultivated by lord, one by peasants; 6 bordars; woodland 12 acres, pasture 50 acres.*Wilmersham.* Value 30s.; land for 2 ploughs; 3 serfs, 5 villeins, 3 bordars; woodland 200 acres, pasture 200 acres.*Stoke Pero.* Value 5s.; land for 2 ploughs; 2 bordars, 1 serf; woodland 60 acres, pasture 50 acres.

KEY TO FIGS. 2 - 4.



Parish Boundary 1900.

Possible extent of cultivation in 11th century.

Woodland.

Present day open moorland.

Pasture (occasionally ploughed) in 11th century.

Possible manorial boundary (where different from parish boundary).

Possible Domesday farms.

Present day farms.

Stoke Pero also has a simple manorial structure. There are no villeins and only two bordars and one serf. There is land for two plough teams but only one plough, fifty acres of pasture and sixty of wood. There being no villeins it can be assumed that farming activities were all based on the home farm and that the plough team would have worked the more gently sloping land just above the farm that is at present used in rotation for arable and pasture, while the woodland would have been, then as now, on the steeper valley sides below. Pasture land would probably have covered most of the rest of the present day enclosed area. If the interpretation of ploughland and acre is fairly accurate, then it would seem that the area of land around Stoke Pero used for agriculture in the 11th century cannot have been much less than it is now. The appearance of the settlement as a whole cannot have changed much since the Middle Ages. This little settlement, approached by a narrow hedged sunken lane, is situated at about 1,000 ft. O.D. in the narrow strip of land above the steep, wooded valley sides and below the exposed inhospitable heather-clad moor. Its farmhouse, outbuildings and cowsheds, built of local red sandstone, are beside the small plain church with its squat tower.

Just opposite Stoke Pero across the valley is the settlement of Wilmersham. Although larger and more highly valued than Stoke Pero in Domesday Book, it did not have a church and is now part of Stoke Pero parish. It is difficult to decide where the boundary between the two manors would have been but it is tentatively suggested that the boundaries may have followed the streams, these being the most obvious natural lines. Where the 1890 parish boundary of Stoke Pero will not provide a manorial boundary, as in the division between Bagley and Stoke Pero, the stream is suggested instead.

Unlike the manors previously described, Wilmersham included five villeins; and so five farms besides the home farm can be suggested as having existed at Wilmersham in the 11th century. East and West Lucott and Buckethole are first recorded in 1279 when they were owned by the Priory of Taunton. Buckethole is now in the parish of Luccombe but, as it was mentioned with Lucott, we may assume that it was part of the same estate. Littlecombe and Poole are both old farms on sites at the head of streams in the belt of cultivable land. These sites are similar to those chosen by other early settlements such as Wilmersham and Stoke Pero. It would therefore seem sensible to suggest these as Domesday farms. All the farms in the present parish of Stoke Pero can be said to have been occupied in the 11th century and when the areas of ploughlands and pasture recorded in Domesday book are mapped and compared with the modern boundary of enclosed land it can be seen that the land used, even if only in a very unintensive way (as the pasture would have been) was very similar in area to that farmed today. It may seem surprising that the area should not have increased, especially when we think of the intense colonization of land that is supposed to have taken place during the 13th century. Possibly more land was cultivated then but went out of use with later decreases of population. The fact that so much land was used in the 11th century does show that this area was settled early, probably by the earlier Celtic population rather than during the 13th century colonizations.

The manor of Culbone presents a rather different picture. Here two villeins are recorded and the only two possible villein farms are Broomstreet and Silcombe, both mentioned in the manorial accounts in the 14th century. Culbone church and farm are both deep in a steep combe descending sharply to the sea. There could never have been

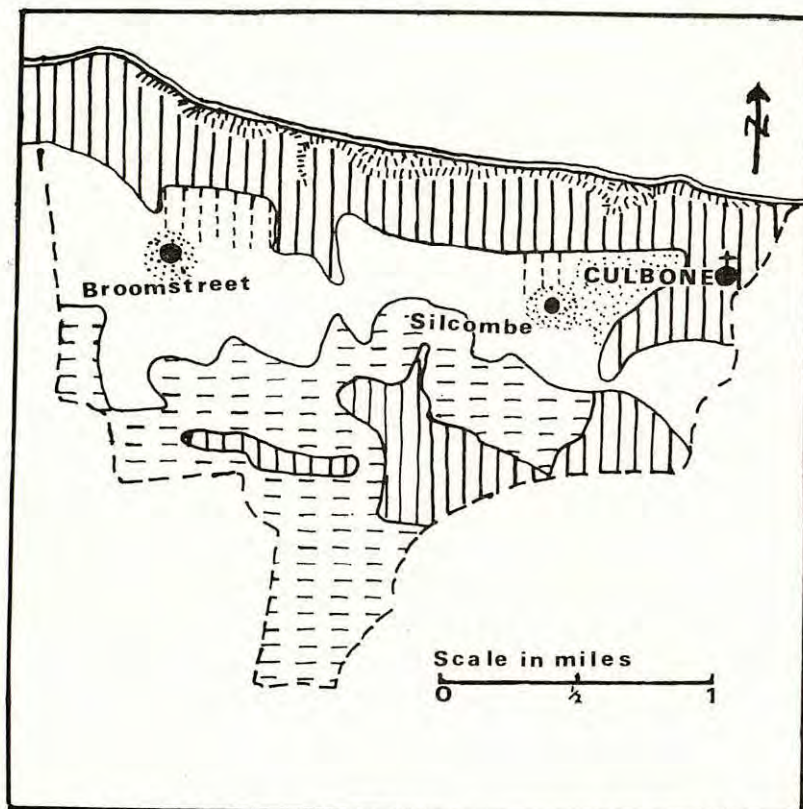


FIG. 3

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The Manor of Culbone in the 11th century.

Domesday entries:

Value 15s.; land for 2 ploughs; 2 villeins, 1 bordar, 1 serf; woodland 100 acres, pasture 50 acres.

any possibility of cultivation in this combe and the ploughlands and pasture must have been on the flatter land above. Here, however, there would appear to have been more clearance of land at a later date, as the present limit of cultivation includes an area larger than that of the 11th century.

Porlock manor is more difficult to reconstruct on a simple pattern. The manor of Porlock was valued at 25 shillings and had six villeins, three bordars and six serfs. Land for twelve plough teams would probably have included a flat, fertile area of Porlock Vale where a three-field system would probably have operated. The field pattern shown on the 1841 tithe map is evidence for this, as the lowland fields show up as long, rectangular, strip-like enclosures while those of the uplands are small, square or rectangular in shape, suggesting 'Celtic' origin. Domesday specifically states that only half of the three hides worked was in demesne. This would leave one and a half hides (about 170 acres) to be divided among six villeins. Five of the nine isolated farmsteads in Porlock parish can definitely be traced to the early Middle Ages through references in bailiffs' accounts, pleas of the forest and subsidy rolls. There is little to choose between

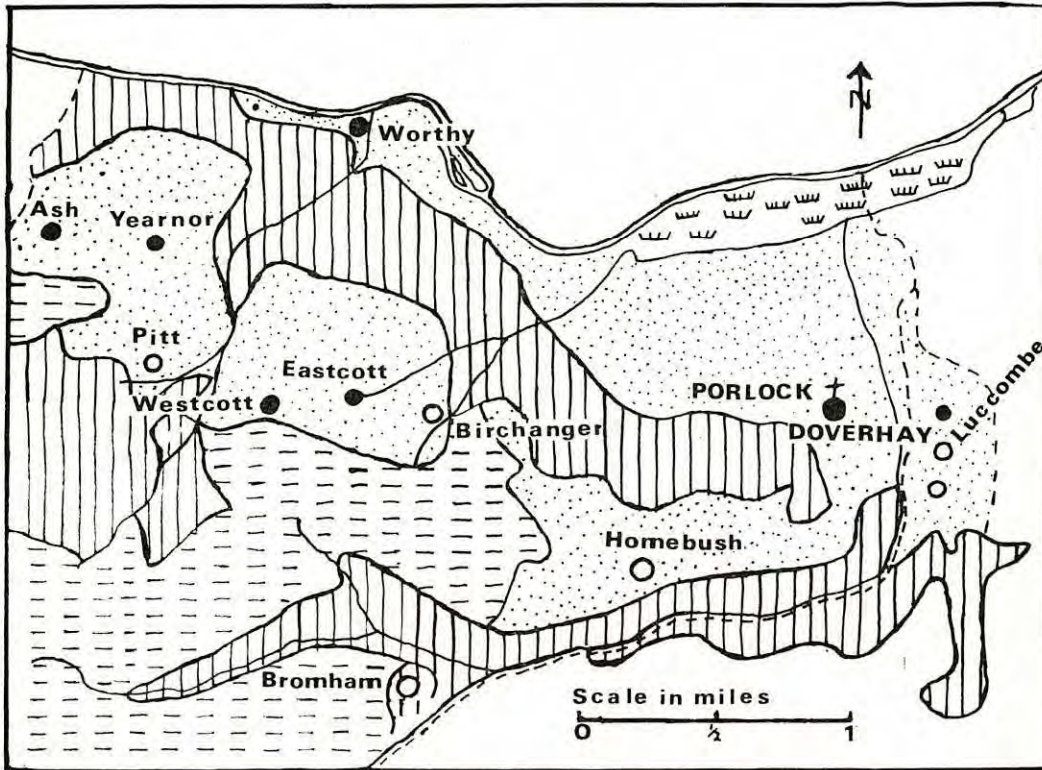


FIG. 4

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The Manors of Porlock and Doverhay in the 11th century.

Domesday entries:

Porlock. Value 25s.; 6 hides cultivated by lord, 6 by peasants; 6 villeins, 3 bordars, 6 serfs.*Doverhay*. Value 8s.; land for 1 plough; 2 villeins, 1 bordar.

the siting of these farms as far as soil or accessibility is concerned and it would therefore be difficult to say which farms pre-date Domesday and appear as villein farms in 1087. Nevertheless, it is probable that at least six farms date from before the Norman Conquest.

Westcott, Ash, Worthy, and Yearnor are all mentioned before 1400. Roger de Westcot is recorded in the pleas of the forest for 1257 and Phillip de Ash also appears in the pleas for that year.⁴ In 1306 the Porlock bailiffs' accounts record that Robert de la Worthy held Worthy as a free tenant.⁵ Yearnor was a manor at the time of King John, and was afforested by him.

Eastcott is first mentioned in the bailiffs' accounts in 1426 when there was a deficiency in the rent. "-cott" as a place-name ending often suggests a secondary settlement and, as there is no mention of this farm until the 15th century, it is possible that it was in fact founded later than the 11th century as a subsidiary farm to that at Westcott. There are no early records concerning Bromham, Birchanger, Pitt or Homebush, although an early window in the farmhouse at Homebush could date from the 15th century. The fact

⁴ E. J. Rawle, *Annals of Exmoor Forest* (Taunton, 1873).

⁵ C. E. H. Chadwyck-Healey, *op. cit.* Appendix C.

that a farm is not mentioned does not necessarily mean that it did not exist, but it does mean that we have to guess which sites are likely to have been occupied in the 11th century.

Porlock is the only Domesday entry for this area where the number of serfs and bordars is considerable. Here both highland and lowland systems of farming meet as indicated by the 1841 field pattern. The serfs and bordars would have individual plots of land for subsistence crops, probably in the area behind the village shown as very small, rectangular fields on the tithe map and it is not surprising that it is this manor with the largest number of unfree peasants that later became the only village of any significance in the area studied.

It is interesting to note that in most cases the amount of land available for ploughing is more than could have been coped with by the existing plough teams. Catherine Lineham in her studies on Dartmoor⁶ also finds this excess of ploughlands over plough teams and interprets it as strengthening the probability of a considerable outfield where parts of the land were broken up for cultivation and then abandoned again.

It is hoped that this attempt at reconstructing the 11th century settlement and agriculture of a very limited area of eastern Exmoor will have helped to show the importance of small studies of this sort in increasing our understanding of highland England at this time. While the dangers of attempting to assign areal measurements to terms such as carucate and hide are fully realized, it is nonetheless worth while attempting a study of an area of agricultural land at different periods. Such studies when carried out over larger areas may indeed surprise us and we may well find that the areas of land cultivated in the 11th century were remarkably similar to those under cultivation today. We may find that not only are the farms and roads of the seventh edition one inch ordnance survey map those that would have appeared on a 1087 edition but also that the area of unimproved moorland has changed only slightly in the last eight hundred years.

The starting point for this interpretation of Domesday entries was provided by Prof. W. G. Hoskins' essay entitled "The Highland Zone in Domesday Book", published in his book, *Provincial England* (1963) in which he drew attention to the lack of work done using Domesday evidence to reconstruct the 11th century topography of highland Britain. His aim in this essay was to encourage "further research into the medieval agrarian history of this neglected part of England and Wales: the land of few villages and many hamlets, even more so of isolated farmsteads, of pasture and of livestock, of small fields enclosed in severality from the beginning, or at least from the 14th century, and of wild upland commons."

⁶ Catherine D. Lineham, "Deserted sites and rabbit warrens on Dartmoor, Devon" (*Medieval Archaeology*, 10, 1966).