

THE BURGHAL HIDAGE — LYNG

BY DAVID HILL

In his recent article¹ Grinsell pointed out the need for work on the Somerset burhs. Although some work has been done towards identifying the burhs at Langport and Watchet, those at Axbridge and Lyng await identification.

Fortunately at Lyng we have literary references of a contemporary nature which should prove of value in the identification. All versions of the "Burghal Hidage"² state that to Lyng belong 100 hides; the ending of the Nowell Transcript³ makes it clear that these 100 hides bear a relationship to the length of the wall of $4\frac{1}{8}$ feet for every hide. At Lyng this would give a length of wall of $412\frac{1}{2}$ ft. Robertson remarked in her editorial notes "the area enclosed at Lyng must have been extremely small" and there the matter has rested.

There are the other references which may be of help. First the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the annal for 878 records that Alfred built a stronghold (*geweorc*) at Athelney. Aethelweard⁴ in his annal for the same year adds that Athelney lies in a marsh.

There was then before the generally agreed date for the organization of the burghal system a burh just to the east of Lyng. This was a slight fortification on the island in the tidal marsh which was to become the site of the monastery of Athelney, and it is in the account of the founding of this monastery by Alfred that we find a more helpful reference to Lyng.

Asser,⁵ writing perhaps in 893, states that "He [Alfred] ordered the foundation of two great monasteries; one for monks in the place called Athelney, which is surrounded on all sides by very great swampy and impassable marshes, so that no one can approach it by any means except in punts or by a bridge (*per unum pontem*) which has been made with laborious skill between two fortresses (*arces*). At the western end of this bridge a very strong fort has been placed of most beautiful workmanship by the king's command."

This points to two burhs joined together by a length of bridge, or more probably, a causeway. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* points to one of the burhs being Athelney itself and since there was another to the west this must be the burh at Lyng, built "by the king's command" and mentioned in the Burghal Hidage.

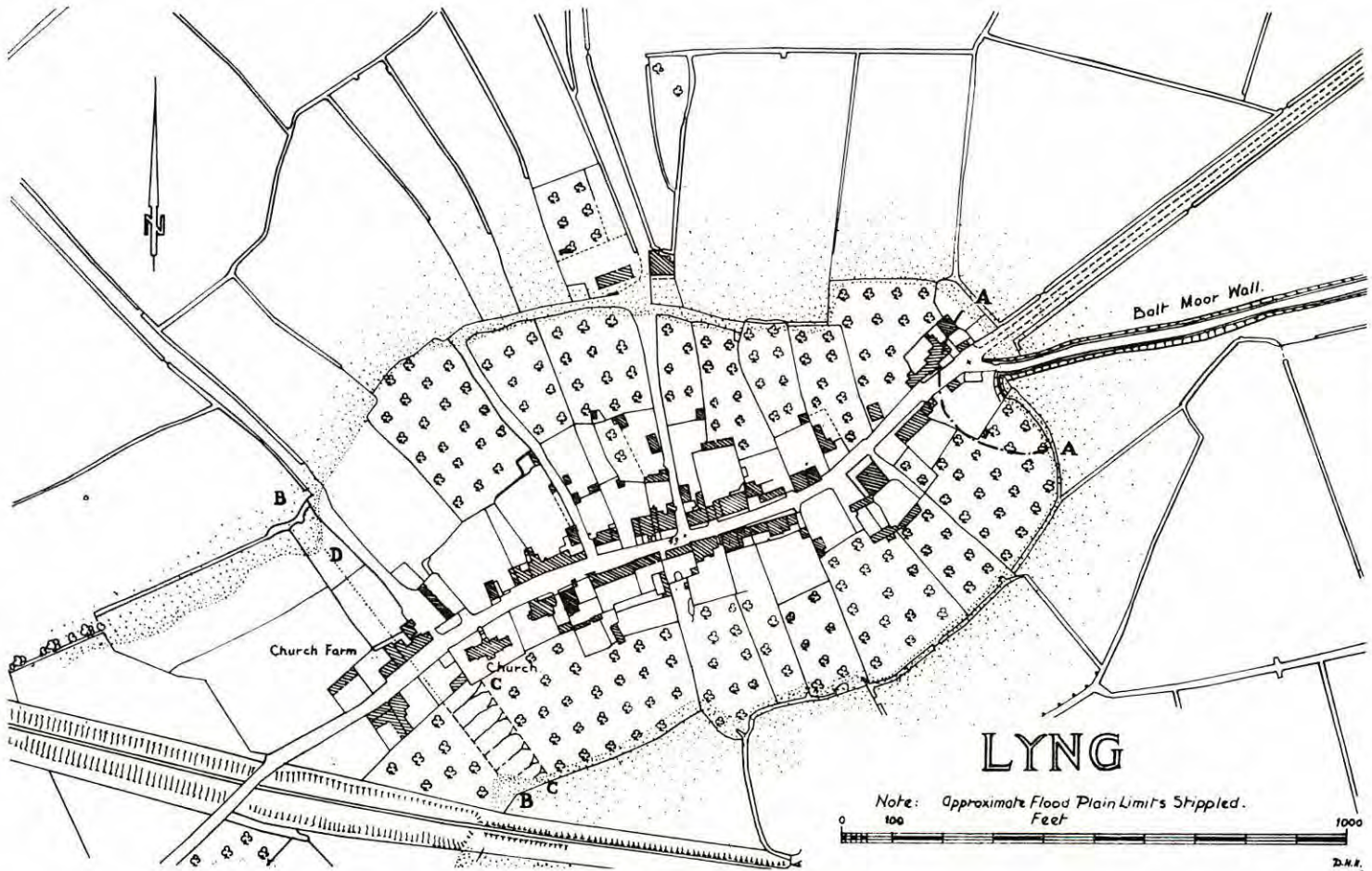
¹ L. V. Grinsell (1965), "Somerset Archaeology 1931-65", *Proc. Som. A. S.*, 109, 47-77.

² The Nowell transcript; John Rylands Latin ms. 155. f. 3v (c. 1210); Liber Rubeus Scaccarii f. 29 (c. 1230); BM. Hargrave ms. 313. f. 15v (c. 1260); Corpus Christi Cambridge ms. 70, f. 3 (c. 1310); Cotton Claudius D. ii, f. iv (c. 1320); Oriol Oxford ms. 46, f. 2v (c. 1330).

³ The Nowell transcript (1562) of Cotton Otho B. xi (c. 1025) printed by A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (1939), 246-8.

⁴ A. Campbell (1962), *The Chronicle of Aethelweard*, 42.

⁵ W. H. Stevenson (1959), *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 79-80.



Based upon the Ordnance Survey Map of 1904

This second burh, listed with the other royal burhs, is the one with the wall of $412\frac{1}{2}$ ft.⁶ To locate a reasonable area for a burh enclosed by a wall of this length we must realise that Lyng is a promontory sticking out into the Somerset marshes, with only a narrow neck of land connecting it to the higher ground to the west. It has been demonstrated by Robertson in her edition of the Burghal Hidage that at Wareham the side covered by water was not included in the assessment. We are therefore looking for a line which cuts off the burh from flood plain to flood plain (shown stippled on the accompanying plan). One such line, A-A, would cover a bridgehead nearest Athelney, but takes in too small an area; on the other hand the line B-B cuts off the whole promontory the town is built on.

An examination of this line on the ground reveals at C-C what look very like the remains of a bank and ditch. These have the correct alignment and disappear under the churchyard wall;⁷ the ditch reappears as a dip in the road, and is lost again under Church Farm (although there are still indications of the ditch at D).

The length of a ditch on this line would come well within the limits of accuracy one would expect, and it is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that this portion of unscheduled earthwork represents the town bank of the burh at Lyng.

A possible arrangement, then, of Saxon Lyng would be the town bank enclosing the modern village (with a light line of defence on the marsh shore-line), a causeway (on the line of the Balt Moor Wall?), a second burh (on the knoll immediately west of Athelney Hill?) and the monastery itself on the hill.

⁶ One would expect a wall *in the region* of $412\frac{1}{2}$ ft. as the very neat figure of 100 hides was probably arrived at by "rounding off" a figure of anywhere between 90 and 110 hides, representing a wall of approximately 370-453 ft.

⁷ This would place the church on top of the town bank, a situation paralleled by Wareham, Wallingford and Cricklade, and dictated perhaps by the advantages of having the most solid building in the burh to act as a bastion on the wall. This assumes, as seems likely, that the *earliest* church is contemporaneous with the town bank.