

THE WOWWALL: SOME ASPECTS OF GOVERNMENT AND LAND-DRAINAGE EARLY IN THE 15th CENTURY

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Among the collection of Ashton Court papers in the Bristol Record Office is a series of medieval manuscripts mainly relating to the manor of Hutton near Weston-super-Mare.¹ One of these, numbered 47, would appear, from its description in the catalogue, to offer less to a researcher into the history of that village than to an author seeking material for an exciting story, for it is said to be 'an account of attacks by Walter Symond of Worle, John Cranstoukes and Philip Webbe of Norton with a great company on a wall called "Wowwall" and a ditch made by the prior of Worspring and his tenants, the vicar of Locking etc.' Upon examination, however, this document, which is attributed to the early part of the 15th century, proves to be of considerable value to the local historian, for it sheds an interesting light upon a fairly obscure corner of the history of a few parishes in Winterstoke Hundred in North Somerset. In the following analysis of this document the present writer has chosen to refer to it, not as No. 47, but by that extraordinary name Wowwall, which figures in it so prominently.

The Wowwall manuscript consists of a parchment scroll formed by three membranes stitched together. A large part of the first of these is so badly faded that its abbreviated Latin text is not wholly intelligible. However, apart from a few odd words, the rest of the document can be read and interpreted.

From both its form and content it would be very difficult to fit it into any one category of document for, although a large part of the text is purely narrative — relating the construction of and subsequent attacks upon the wall — it is interspersed with either statements or positive injunctions concerning the responsibility of certain bodies or individuals for such works as scouring watercourses and repairing roads. In fact, apart from its arrangement and style, it resembles a court-roll, and it could well be a summary of items presented and orders issued at one or more sessions of Winterstoke hundred court.

With the aid of local tithe-maps some of the place-names mentioned in this document can be identified well enough to indicate that it concerns a small area within the parishes of Banwell, Locking and Worle.² (Fig. 1) Although no mention is made of any particular year, regnal or A.D., internal evidence, as will appear later, suggests a date for this document and the events it relates in the early years of the 15th century, probably between 1404 and 1419.

The subject which receives most, if intermittent, attention in the document is certainly the construction and destruction of the Wowwall and of certain 'stowks' built upon it. 'The said wall, called Wowwall,' so the document (translated) explains, 'was made and commissioned (*ordinatus*) to bar the flooding of the fields between the manor³ of Banwell on the one side' (the east) 'and the manors of Worle, Hutton, Ashcombe, Weston, Milton, Uphill, Oldmixon (and) Locking' (on the west). This was not a sea-wall, such as those built and maintained by some of the manorial

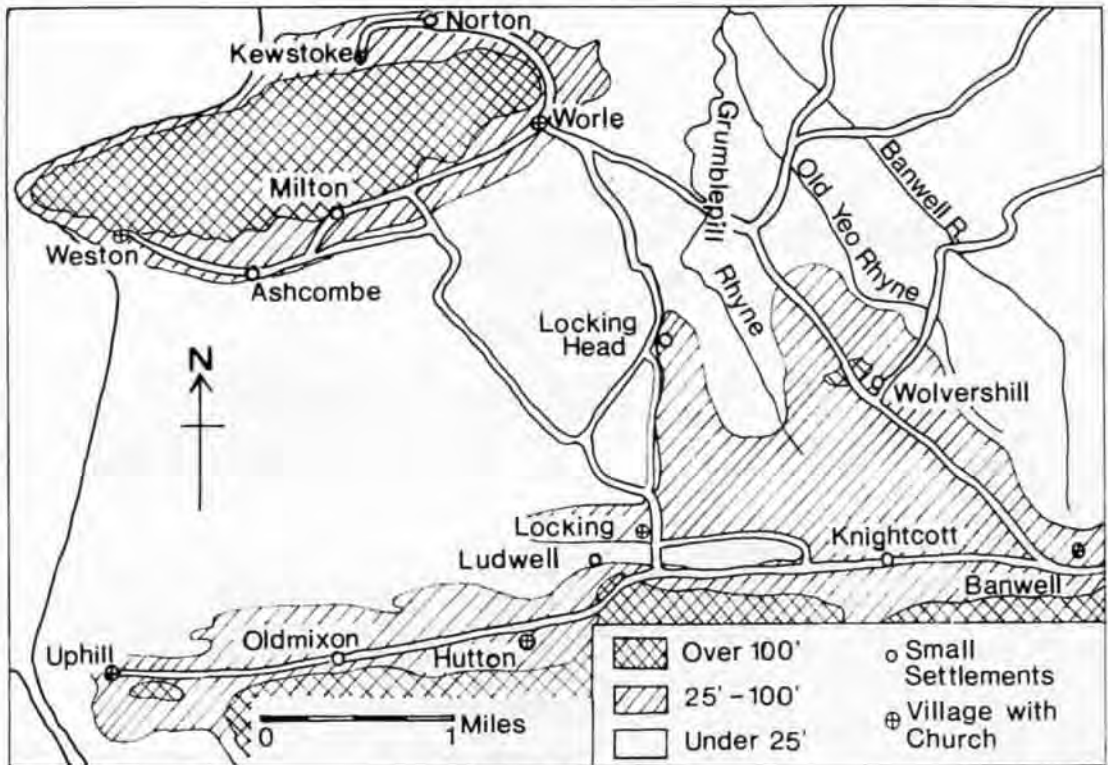


Fig.1. THE GENERAL AREA

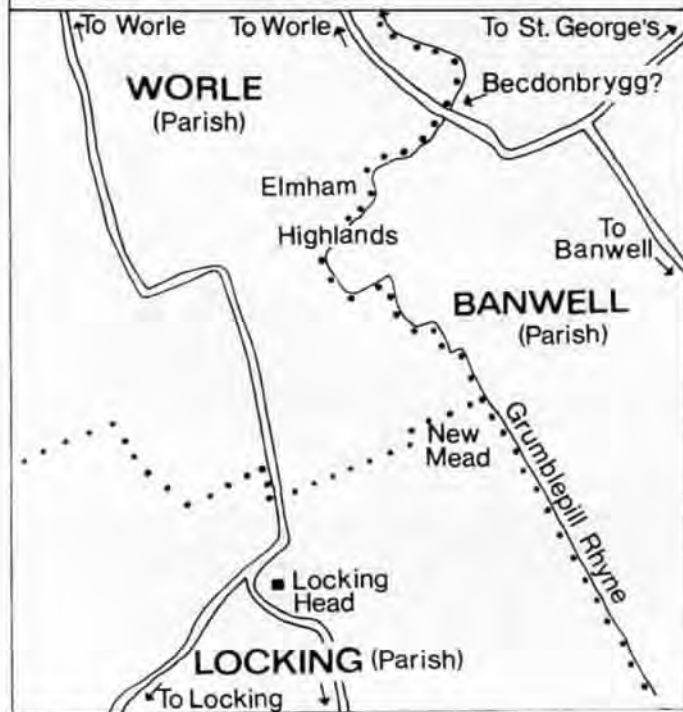


Fig.2. SKETCH MAP OF THE WOWWALL AREA

== Probable medieval roads
 Parish boundaries
 0 100 400 yards

tenants of Bleadon⁴ along the banks of the tidal Axe, but apparently a similar dyke along the left (mainly west) bank of a certain stretch of a narrow inland watercourse called 'Grumboldyspull', still known and named on modern maps as Grumblepill Rhyne (Fig. 1).

This sluggish stream, which forms much of the boundary between the parish of Banwell and the parishes of Locking and Worle, rises just east of the R.A.F. Camp at Locking on land below the 50ft. contour⁵ and follows a fairly straight north-westerly course for almost a mile before it begins to meander in the low-lying land east of the lane between Locking Head Farm and Worle's Moor Lane⁶ (Fig. 2). For the next mile or so it winds roughly northwards around fields which, even today, often lie under sheets of water after heavy or prolonged rainfall. Following a gradually converging northerly course to the east of Grumblepill Rhyne are the Old Yeo Rhyne and the Banwell River. Before modern drainage systems, when these three watercourses were swollen with rain, and particularly when a high tide prevented their outfall into Woodspring Bay, there must have been continuous flooding westwards across the moorlands of Worle, Locking and Hutton to meet the stream flowing from Ludwell (later called the Hutton and Locking Rhyne) and its tributaries whose outfall into the Axe would be similarly checked at Uphill (Fig. 2).

It was evidently to prevent such flooding in a westerly direction that a wall or dyke was built along the left bank of Grumblepill Rhyne, particularly along its most tortuous stretch. This is most probably the origin of its extraordinary name Wowwall, the 'wow' part being derived from the Old English *woeg* or *wo*, meaning 'bent'⁷ to distinguish it from straighter stretches of the wall, each named after the owner of the land on which it had been built by him. The responsibility for the building and maintenance of the Wowwall rested upon a number of local land-holders, namely 'the prior of Worspring and his tenants of Locking and Worle, the bishop of Bath and his tenants of Worle, the lord of Norton and his tenants, and the vicar of Locking.'

The prior of Worspring, the vicar of Locking and others were also ordered to build 'stowks' upon the wall at various points. The word 'stooks' was used in a similar context in a Banwell court roll of 1592⁸ recording that five landholders at Wolvershill were presented for not having satisfactorily made 'all their stooks between Bustilandgate and Burgeways Bowe', that is, along the course of the Old Yeo Rhyne. But other references in the Wowwall manuscript revealed that one of the 'stowks' was built crosswise (*transverso*) on the wall from the Grumblepill to New Mead and another lengthwise (*in longitudine*) adjoining the rhyne between one part of the wall and another. (Fig. 2). A 'stowk' was thus a form of stockade or high fence of wooden stakes, an interpretation which accords with a clause which accompanies almost every mention, in the text, of building either the wall or a 'stowk': 'so that there may be no bridle-path (*via equestris*) nor drove (*ad animalia fuganda*)'.

From the narrative portions of the document concerning the Wowwall and its stowks, it would seem that the purpose of this clause was to prevent damage to the wall from the hooves of horses and other farm animals such as oxen. For after the wall had been built, and the vicar of Locking had 'well and competently built and maintained' a stowk upon it as ordered, 'there came Walter Symond of Worle, John Cranstouke of Solestreet from the same township and Philip Webbe of Norton with a great company with force and arms against the law and the peace, and broke and destroyed the said stowk and flung (it) into the common (water) course to the injury of the country side (*patrie*) — £10.00'. 'The same vicar', the account continues, on another occasion was compelled and distraised upon all his goods to rebuild the said stowk.' This he did, and again the same three men and their company destroyed it. Similarly, Roger Walsh and Walter Coker built a stowk lengthwise along another stretch of the Grumblepill 'to preserve the countryside from the flooding of the fields', and once again 'Walter Symond with all his associates (*sociis*) . . . came and broke and destroyed the said stowk so that there was great flooding in the countryside, with damage assessed at £10.00. This particular stowk, built lengthwise, seems to have served the same purpose as the wall itself and perhaps, if built on the wall, to increase its height. However, eventually the same three assailants 'with their

great company . . . trampled down (*conculcaverunt*) and brought low (*bassaverunt*) the said wall of Wowwall so that the greatest flooding of the fields was made through the defect of the said wall to the injury of the countryside', this time not assessed. Apparently then the wall or dyke could be rendered ineffective merely by the trampling of many human feet, for on no occasion are the assailants said to be mounted; hence the value of a stowk or stockade built across or on the wall to prevent its use as a track for heavy animals.

The motives for these persistent attacks upon certain stowks and upon the Wowwall itself are not disclosed in the document, and, curiously enough, it does not record any attacks upon the particular 'stowk' which the prior of Worspring had to maintain across the wall 'into Mewmead opposite the Crookedwithy'. Nor, apparently, was another stretch of wall, built by John Belston between Newmead and Churchacre and called appropriately 'Belstoneswall', subjected to such treatment. One of the three ringleaders, Philip Webbe of Norton, may well have been the same Philip Webbe who, according to a Banwell account roll of 1445⁹ held three acres of land in Banwell, which, at an annual rent of 1d. per acre, must have been poor moorland. If so, and especially if his Banwell land was in the low-lying area near the Grumblepill and north of Wolverhill, (Fig. 1) he may well have been provoked by the erection of stowks on a wall which otherwise could have provided him with a firm and dry passage over soft wet ground. But then he would have had nothing to gain from the final destruction of the wall itself.

The same bitter opposition, in fact, was aroused by another form of protection against flooding, a ditch; for, according to the same document, when Henry Bernard made a ditch along his meadow between Elmham and Becdonbridge¹⁰ (north of the Wowwall) (Fig. 2), as ordered by the hundred court, the very same Walter Symond and his band 'came with force and arms and blocked it up (*obstruxerunt*)'. Again they appear to have been selective in their targets, for no attack is recorded upon the ditch which the Worle tenants of the prior of Worspring had to scour between Highland and the south corner of the Wowwall, according to the first membrane of the document. The root of the opposition could well have been similar to that recorded in other parts of Somerset by Thomas Gerard in 1633,¹¹ namely the fact that the drainage works — in this case the wall and the ditch — may have severed droves they had long used. Still more likely is the universal ground for objection to drainage schemes, the fact that they protect certain areas (as here all the low-lying land between the Grumblepill and the coast at Uphill) without benefit to, yet at the expense of, and even perhaps to the detriment of the owners of the land on which the works are constructed or which lie on their unprotected side. Whatever their motives, Walter Symond and his associates appear to have been ultimately successful in their opposition, although the limits of this solitary record, perhaps, provide too slender a basis for such an assumption.

Provoking less active opposition but probably receiving only reluctant cooperation after much prodding, were the various injunctions for scouring certain watercourses. Apart from that of the ditch mentioned in the previous paragraph, the scourings prescribed in the Wowwall document are all stated on that first badly faded membrane and it is not therefore possible to be certain of the whole facts. However, it is reasonable to conjecture that the main watercourse involved was the Grumblepill and it is clear that the scouring of one section was the responsibility of the prior of Worspring and his tenants of Worle, and that another was to be undertaken by the freeholders (*liberi*) and their tenants. As for how it worked in practice it may not be unfair, perhaps, to judge from manorial court rolls of the period in this region, which show that neglect of scouring was one of the commonest charges brought against manorial tenants.

The Wowwall document ends with another set of injunctions, clearly expressed in the imperative use of the future tense, concerning a topic which appears to be irrelevant (though it may have a consequential link with the subject of flooding), namely the poor condition of the roads. In this matter the responsibility was clearly placed upon the tithings, not upon the manorial lords, nor upon the churchwardens.

Thus the repair and maintenance of 'the King's highway' between Worle and Banwell was divided between the tithing of Worle (from there to Becconbridge) and the tithing of Wolverhill (from that bridge to Banwell) 'wherever it be completely blocked to the great injury of the country side'. Similarly the tithing of Worle was to repair and maintain the King's highway between Worle and Locking 'as far as Lockinghede' (i.e. Locking Head Farm),¹² and the tithing of Locking was to maintain it from there onwards. The text of the Wowwall document ends with this observation on the condition of this particular road: (this) 'road, the tithing of Worle allows (to be) completely blocked so that no one could step (*paterare*) (but) at his own peril'.

It is important to realise that these roads, whatever their origin, were, by the 15th century, genuine highways since they linked one township, however small and unimportant, with another, and their equivalents today would be a county responsibility. Yet the same term 'King's highway' (*via Regis*), was applied in the Hutton manorial court roll of 1428 to the 'Medeway' — a road which has not yet been positively identified, but almost certainly served only to link the village with one of its two principal meadows. In this case the blame for its 'ruinous' condition was put upon the homage and tenants of the manor.¹³

It seems likely that the two highways of the Wowwall document should still be recognisable, at least for much of their route. The one from Worle to Banwell probably followed the course of the present B3146 at least as far as Becconbridge where it crossed the Grumblepill, but beyond that its course via Wolverhill is less certain. Similarly, the medieval road from Worle to Locking most likely followed the course of the present Moor Lane and the lane running southwards from it to Locking Head Farm. (Fig. 1). Beyond that point, however, there were at least two possible routes to Locking village until the R.A.F. Camp was constructed, but the Wowwall document gives no hint of which was the original highway. In attempting to trace in more detail these roads and flood-walls, and to identify more of the places named in the document, there is still much scope for both documentary research and field-work for an interested local historian. Such matters are beyond the scope of the present article.

It is, however, not irrelevant to attempt to identify some of the persons named in the manuscript, in order to provide some evidence of its date. It has already been pointed out that one of the attackers on the Wowwall, Philip Webbe, may have been mentioned in a Banwell account roll of 1445. Concerning his two companions little is known except that their families lived in this region for several hundred years. The ringleader, Walter Symond, may have belonged to the same family as John Simound, whose name appeared on the Exchequer lay subsidy roll for Shipham in 1327,¹⁴ and, more probably, John and William Symond, who were free tenants of the manor of Norton Beauchamp, just north of Worle, in 1472,¹⁵ and also to the family farming in Oldmixon and Hutton during the 18th and early 19th centuries. His other companion, John Cranstouke, was surely a descendant of the Geoffrey Cranstouke on the Worle subsidy roll in 1327. The two landowners previously mentioned, John Belston and Henry Bernard, also have their family counterparts on the same subsidy rolls in Robert Belston (Worle) and Gilbert Bernard (Congresbury). Again there is scope here for further research.

Roger Walsh and Walter Coker may be more closely identified. Roger was almost certainly one of two persons of that name who were, father and son, the last two of the Walsh or Waleys line as lords of the manor of Hutton, dying respectively in 1404 and 1426.¹⁶ Since the younger Roger died without male heirs, a triple partition of the manor among his surviving sister and their two nieces necessitated a thorough survey of his estates both in and beyond Hutton, and from this survey¹⁷ it would appear that he did not then hold any land in Worle, Locking or Banwell. The inference is that it must have been the first Roger Walsh who, presumably as a local landowner, was ordered to build a stowk, and that therefore the Wowwall document was compiled either before 1404 or not long afterwards. However, it is possible that the second Roger Walsh held land in that locality but had disposed of it before he died and that the deed recording that transaction has not survived or yet come to light.

If so, his experience, and that of others, with the stowk and the Wowwall could well have induced him to get rid of such obligations. There is another consideration which tends to point to the second Roger Walsh. According to the Wowwall document he collaborated in the building of the stowk with Walter Coker and his heirs. Now Walter, whose family had held lands in Worle since 1361,¹⁸ had married the second Roger Walsh's sister, Agnes,¹⁹ but he must have died before 1419, for in that year Thomas Sambrooke, who became the second husband of Agnes, was one of the principal witnesses to a deed of settlement concerning the marriage of Roger's niece, another Agnes, to Richard Payn.²⁰ As far as can be ascertained from Hutton records, Walter Coker and Agnes had only one heir, John Coker, whose name first appears as that of one of the lords of the manor in Hutton court rolls in 1445.²¹ This fact does pose a problem, for the Wowwall document specifically mentions 'the heirs of the said Walter'. However, Walter may have had other heirs from a previous marriage, or John Coker may have been the only issue of Walter and Agnes to survive them. Certainly there were Cokers in the neighbourhood much later in the century. A Robert Coker was a free tenant of the manor of Norton Beauchamp in 1472,²² and so too was William Dodesham of Cannington who, like Richard Payn, had married one of Roger Walsh's nieces, Joan, and was therefore yet another lord of the manor of Hutton.

On the whole then, and particularly if the identification of Philip Webbe is correct, it would seem that the Walsh and Coker stowk was built at some time between 1404 and 1419. The manuscript was probably written not much later, certainly not long after the events it records. For one thing it gives a very specific day of the year for the attack upon that particular stowk, namely, 'the Sabbath day after the Feast of St. Mark', but omits the actual year. Unless the year has already been stated in one of the badly faded passages on the first membrane of the document or on another membrane which should have preceded it but has since been detached and lost, this omission surely indicates that the account was written within one year of that event. A similar inference may be drawn from the fact that the document does not record any action against Walter Symond and his accomplices after their last, most brazen act of defiance of an order made by the hundred court.

So this apparently insignificant account of attacks upon the Wowwall proves to be a source of considerable importance to the historian of this small area of North Somerset, now within the administrative county of Avon. Within its small compass of some 800 words this document presents a contemporary picture of the area in the early 15th century — the names of some of its land-owners, the names of some of its fields, watercourses and other features, the condition of its roads, its various methods of land-drainage and flood-prevention. In this last respect the Wowwall document appears to be unique; certainly the present writer, within his limited experience, has not come across another single manuscript which records both a set of measures to be undertaken, or duties to be performed, and the local reaction when they are carried out. It would also seem to be the only surviving medieval account of land drainage in that part of the Somerset levels north of the Axe, for it is not until well into the 16th century that Yatton's churchwardens' accounts²³ make brief references to 'dyking ye new yew' (Yeo) and 'making a dore to the new yere' (sluice), and the previously mentioned Banwell court roll, which records the neglect of 'walls, stooks and watercourses', was compiled in the 34th year of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

Of far more general significance, however, is the glimpse which this document provides into the workings of local government in the early 15th century, at least in this particular area. Since most of the information concerning land-drainage and coastal protection in Somerset during the Middle Ages is provided by the records of the great ecclesiastical landlords, especially the abbot of Glastonbury and the prior of St. Swithin's, Winchester (for Bleadon), it has been natural to assume that the feudal organisation for dealing with such matters on their estates was the general pattern for the county. This was the system whereby certain tenants held their land, wholly or partly, upon the condition that they undertook and maintained certain works for drainage or flood-prevention. No doubt there were many other manors

where land was held upon such conditions, but the Wowwall document reveals the existence of a more complex system, involving the hundred and the tithing as well as the manorial lord and his tenants.

Although in fact the Hundred of Winterstoke is named only twice in the Wowwall document, those two instances are sufficient to indicate that the practical measures to prevent flooding were undertaken upon the orders issued by the hundred court and that the court's authority was unquestioned. The two land-holders, Roger Walsh and Walter Coker, one of them at least being a manorial lord, are said to have built their stowk 'for preserving the countryside from the flooding of the fields according as they were compelled in the Hundred of Winterstoke'. Again, the document says, Henry Bernard 'was lawfully compelled by the Hundred of Winterstoke to make a ditch . . .'. If one reads the whole manuscript with these passages in mind, one is made aware of the pervasive presence of that hundred court in every other use of the word 'compelled', in such legal phraseology as 'against the law and the peace' and the tediously repetitive 'truly' (*vero*) and 'aforesaid', and in every imperative use of the future tense — 'he shall scour' (*escurabit*) the watercourse, 'they shall build and maintain' (*edificabunt et sustentabunt*) 'a wall or a stowk', and 'the tithing . . . shall repair and maintain' (*reparabit et sustentabit*) the King's highway . . .

These orders were issued, not merely to the tithing or an individual holder of a modest estate, such as, presumably, John Belston and Henry Bernard, but also to the prior of Worspring who was left to ensure that his tenants undertook the actual work. The sanctions by which the Hundred enforced its will are also made clear in the Wowwall document. Henry Bernard made his ditch 'on pain of amercement and great penalty', and the vicar of Locking 'was compelled and distrained upon all his goods' to rebuild his stowk after it had been destroyed. That these orders, and the threats for failing to comply with them, were not issued by a manorial bailiff or by a hundred constable but by the small group of local freeholders who constituted the hundred court is clearly revealed in this account of the vicar of Locking's stowk. He had built it in the first place, we are told, 'according as he was compelled and distrained by the verdict of twelve lawful men in the Hundred of Cheddar',²⁴ evidently an instance of the adaptation for this purpose of the traditional jury such as was used for trials, inquests and territorial surveys. He rebuilt the stowk after its destruction, not merely on account of the previously mentioned threat of distraint, but also 'because in the said Hundred moot (*gemoto*) there was an eager desire' (*anclatio*). Perhaps that is too weak a translation to convey the evident strength of feeling in the meeting which induced the vicar of Locking to make a second attempt after such determined and contemptuous opposition to his stowk.

Nevertheless, this document also leaves us with an impression of the ineffectiveness, or at least the limited power, of the locally constituted 'authority' in practice, when faced with such determined opposition, or even with the passive unwillingness to act, revealed by the tithing of Worle's neglect of the road to Locking. Such attitudes, of course, were not confined to the 15th century, nor to the Hundred of Winterstoke, and in fairness one must admit the possibility of a punitive sequel to the attacks upon the Wowwall, although no record of it (if indeed it was recorded) has survived or so far chanced to come to light.

How fortunate it is then that the Wowwall document, with so much information in so little space, came to be written and has been preserved!

- 1 Bristol Record Office, AC/D11/1-47.
- 2 Roughly within the rectangle bounded by O.S. ST 360623, 380623, 380597 and 360597.
- 3 The word *dominia* used here seems to imply the whole *manerium*, not just the demesne.
- 4 Vide M. Williams, *The Draining of the Somerset Levels* (Cambridge 1970), 44.
- 5 O.S. ST 37606016.
- 6 O.S. ST 36886152.
- 7 *A Compendious Anglo-Saxon and English Dictionary*, ed. Bosworth.
- 8 Public Record Office, SC2/198/1B.
- 9 Somerset Record Office, Microfilm copy, T/PH/vch 5.
- 10 'Elmham' appears on the Worle Tithe Map c. O.S. 367620. 'Becconbrygg' must have been where the road crossed the Grumblepill, near the present Plum Tree Farm, O.S. ST 36806210.
- 11 Williams, *op.cit.* 89.
- 12 O.S. ST 36456100.
- 13 Bristol Record Office, AC/M8/1(a).
- 14 *S.R.S.* iii. 270.
- 15 Public Record Office, S.C.2/200.
- 16 *S.R.S.* xvi. 17, 113. 16 Will of Roger Walsche dated 25th January, 1404, proved 24th May, 1405. Will of Roger Walshe, Gentleman, dated 11th November, 1425, proved 26th November, 1426.
- 17 Bristol Record Office, AC/M8/11.
- 18 M. Nathan, *Annals of West Coker*.
- 19 Bristol Record Office, AC/D11/16 dorse.
- 20 *Ibid.*, AC/D11/14.
- 21 *Ibid.*, AC/M8/1 (a).
- 22 Public Record Office, SC2/200.
- 23 *S.R.S.* iv. 139, 171-2.
- 24 So the original MS, which reads *de Cheddre*. Although there was a small separate Hundred of Cheddar in the 11th century (*Victoria History of Somerset.*, i. 528) it did not survive. The phrase may simply mean 'at' Cheddar, since the Winterstoke Hundred 'moots' were held in various places at different times.

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