

The Honor of Odcomb and Barony of Brito.

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THE extinction of manors and the minute sub-division of lands, which in recent times have resulted from the richness of the soil of Somersetshire and increasing wealth and industry, precludes the possibility of tracing the devolution of landed property in this county to the extent which has been practicable in the adjoining county of Dorset, where the work was commenced at an earlier period, and where estates have been far less broken up and sub-divided than with us. But much material has been preserved from which an early history of many of the land baronys of the county might, though with much labour, be worked out, and a series of such notices in the pages of this journal would form a valuable foundation for a general topographical history of the county. In furtherance of this idea I now offer a few particulars relating to the earliest owners of Trent, by way of addenda to Mr. Batten's interesting account of that manor (vol. xx, p. 113).

The family of Brito, Le Breton, or Bret, alluded to by Mr. Batten as possessing Trent at the Domesday Survey and for some generations afterwards, were territorial barons, and the head of their barony was Odcomb, near Montacute, in this county.

Amongst the numerous military adventurers who flocked from different parts of France to the standard of William, Duke of Normandy on the invasion of England, many came from the adjoining province of Britany, and Alain Fergant, son of Hoel, Earl of Bretagne, is said to have brought with him 5000 Bretons. Ansgar, the founder of the baronial family of Brito, or Le Breton, no doubt acquired that surname from

having come from that province, and he most probably was so called to distinguish him from other Ansgers, such as Ansgar Cocus, and Ansgar Fouver, who are also mentioned as landowners in Somersetshire at the Domesday Survey. Ansgar Brito, however, was also sometimes known by the name of Ansgarus de Montagud, but whether he was related to Drogo de Montagud, the patriarch of the distinguished house of Montacute, or whether he originally resided at Montacute adjoining Odcomb, and was so called from his place of residence, it is now impossible to ascertain. Certain it is, however, that the name of De Montagud was not long retained.

Baronial courts were usually held at the castle or mansion at which the baron or lord of the honor generally resided, and thus such residence became the head of the barony. And though the lord or baron may afterwards have removed to some other place, or have alienated his honor or barony, yet the manors or knights' fees which were held of a chief lord were considered to be so held, not simply of him personally, but of him "as of his honor of so and so," meaning the head of the barony, or the place where the courts were originally held. There can be no doubt therefore that at one time Odcomb was the chief residence of the Le Bretons in Somerset.

Ansgar obtained grants of numerous lordships in Somerset, Devon, and Dorset, the aggregate of which, or of a great part of them, constituted the land barony which in the 12th century was called the barony of Walter Brito, being held by the peculiar military tenure, called tenure by barony. By the name of Ansgarus de Montagud he is mentioned in *Domesday Book* as holding of the king in chief, Prestetune in Somersetshire; and by the simple name of Ansgarus he held of the king Staford, Toriton, Bremelcom, Cadeledone, Mochelesberie, Suetetone, Duveltone, and Gatecombe, in Devonshire. He also held many manors of the Earl of Moreton, viz., Isle (Isle Brewers), Trente, Udecome (Odcomb), Aldeforde, Hundeston, Lochestone, Aisse, Torne, and Stantune in Somerset, Bocheland, Potiford, Buches-

worde, and Smitheham in Devonshire, and two manors in Cerne, and one in Sidelince (Sydling) in Dorsetshire. In Devonshire he also held Bocheland, Ringedone, Filelei, Neutone, and Wadeston, of Baldwin the sheriff. By the name of Ansgerus Brito he was one of the attesting witnesses to the charter of William, Earl of Moreton, founding the Priory of Montacute, in the time of King Henry I.¹

King William Rufus confirmed to the monks of Bermondsey the gift of Walter, son of Ansgar, of two hides in Estanes, and King Henry I confirmed the gift of Preston by Ansgar Brito, and of two hides in Stane, given by Walter his son.² Dugdale says Ansgerus was then a knight of Wynebald de Baalun, but we have met with no original evidence of his having held lands of a superior lord of that name.

In 4 Henry II, 1158, Odcumbe was in lease from the King, and the Sheriff of Somerset accounted for 60s. for its ferm.³ In 7 Henry II, 1161, it had been restored to the family, and Roger Brito paid £20 to the King's Exchequer for fifteen knights' fees in Somerset. He was probably son of Walter Brito, but it is certain that Walter had another son named William, who held two knights' fees and a half in Sidling in Dorset, of the Abbey of Milton, in the time of Roger, Bishop of Sarum, viz., between 1102-3, 3 Henry I and 1139, 4 Stephen.⁴

Roger Brito was succeeded by a second Walter, about 11 Henry II, for in that year the latter owed 300 marks for the relief of his lands, but no portion of it seems to have been then paid. He was no doubt son of either Walter or Roger. In the following year he again accounted for the same sum, viz., for £200, and paying £26 13s. 4d. he left £173 6s. 8d. still owing, which he continued to discharge by annual instalments till 24 Henry II, when he paid £9 13s. 1d., leaving £18 0s. 4d. still due on the same account.⁵ On the assessment of the great aid levied by King Henry II, by virtue of his royal prerogative for marrying his eldest daughter Matilda to Henry

(1). Dugdale's *Monasticon*.(2). *Ibid.*(3). *Lib. Rub.*(4). *Lib. Nig.*(5). *Mag. Rot.*

the Lion, Duke of Saxony, Walter Brito, amongst the barons of Somersetshire, acknowledged that he owed to the King in chief the service of fifteen knights. The names of the knights who held the fees of him were as follows, viz., Roger Fitz Milo, Robert de Valletorta, Rafe de Lega, and William Brito, one knight's fee each; Robert de Stanton, William Fossard, and Alexander Fitz Warine, two fees each. Gilbert Torna, if he could have his whole fee, would have owed the service of two knights. Roger de Bulkewrthe, Robert Bastard, and Geoffrey de Cnolton, half a fee each. In addition to which Walter himself held one knight's fee in demesne. All these, or their ancestors, were enfeoffed before the death of King Henry I, and all the fees were what were termed small fees of the Earldom of Moreton, three of which were only equal to two ordinary knights' fees.⁶ In 13 and 14 Henry II, Walter Brito owed 18s. 4d. scutage for the army in Wales, and in the following year, by the name of "Walter Brit," he paid £6 5s. 0d., for fifteen knights' fees of the honor of Moreton. In the 18 Henry II, he accounted for £9 7s. 6d. for fifteen fees then described as fifteen fees of Montacute. In 22 Henry II he accounted for 40 marks for an amercement, and the following year he had his quietus for the same. In 24 Henry II he was still paying off the debt of his relief as above mentioned, and he owed £18 0s. 4d. for the scutage of Ireland.⁷ After this his condition and that of his family are for some years rather involved in obscurity. In 25 Henry II his debt of £17 0s. 3d. for the residue of his relief, and 18s. 9d. for the scutage of Ireland, are still entered in the sheriff's roll, but nothing seems to have been paid. The sheriff, however, accounted for £7 15s. 8d. for corn sold from the land of Walter Briton, and it is thus evident that his barony must then have been in the hands of the Crown. He may therefore either have lately died leaving a son a minor, or else he may have committed a forfeiture for which his barony had escheated to

(6). Lib. Niger.

(7). Mag. Rot.

the King ; or possibly he may have been found "*non compos mentis.*" Whichever was the case his lands were soon after acquired by William Torel, in whose hands they are found in 28 Henry II, and who then and in the three succeeding years accounts for the debt of Walter Brito, but nothing is entered as paid.⁸ This William Torel seems to have been identical with William Torel, of Torels Hall, in Little Thurrock in Essex, an estate which continued in his family from the time of Henry II to that of Henry VIII.⁹ In 32 Henry II, William Torel is said to be dead, and the King again had the lands of Walter Brito in his own hands. He continued to hold them till 7 Richard I when we again find them in possession of a Walter Brito, who then owed £13 6s. 11d. for his relief. He paid £3 3s. 4d., and left £10 3s. 7d. still owing. The smallness of this sum, as compared with the £200 which was due for the relief of the same lands in 11 Henry II, and its so nearly amounting to the sum still remaining due on the payment of the last instalment in 25 Henry II, affords some ground for conjecture that it was in reality a part of the same debt, and if so Walter Brito may have forfeited his barony and been restored to it in 7 Richard I. But on the other hand it is seen by evidence referred to by Mr. Batten that Walter Croc had both a grandfather and an uncle named Walter Brito, which is consistent with a supposition that the Walter of 7 Richard I was son and heir of the Walter of 25 Henry II, and brother of the mother of Walter Croc.

During the period that the barony was in the King's hands the sheriff, in 32 Henry II, received and accounted for the issues of the lands which were William Torels, of the fee of Walter Briton, and in 33 Henry II, in his account of the scutage of the barons of Dorset and Somerset who did not accompany the King in his expedition to Galwei, he enters £9 7s. 6d. for the scutage of fifteen knights' fees of Moreton, of the honour which was Walter Brits (*qui fuit Walteri Briti*). In the same and

(8). Mag. Rot.

(9). Morant's *History of Essex*, I. 227.

following years on the tallage of the King's demesnes and of the lands which were in the King's hands in Somerset, he reckons £3 9s. 1d. of Yla and of Odecumba, which were William Torel's.¹⁰

In 8 and 9 Richard I, Walter Brito continued to discharge his debt for the relief, but the latter is the last time he is noticed, and he therefore no doubt died about this time. After the death of the last named Walter Brito the inheritance of the barony fell to his coheirs, viz., Walter Croc his nephew and Richard de Heseccumbe or Hattecumbe, which latter was probably son of Alice Brito, sister of Annora, mother of Walter Croc. The descendants of this Richard seem to have assumed the surname of Bret, or else their heiress married a person of that name, for Stephen le Bret was the descendant and heir of Alice, daughter of Walter Brito, and on an inquisition taken after the death of Johanna Bruere, in 49 Henry III, the jury say that she held Odecumbe, Yle, and Milverton in dower. They know of no heirs of the reversion of the manors of Odecumbe and Yle, except the Brets, who had been of Heseccumbe (*qui fuerant de Heseccumbe*) which manors were alienated by the power of Sir William Bruyere the elder (*per potestatem Domini Willielmi Bruyere veterioris*).¹¹ This expression shows that the alienation was by no means voluntary on the part of the coheirs, and it is quite consistent with the accounts we read elsewhere of the rapacity and tyranny of this powerful and wealthy noble. Amongst the fees of William Briwerr of the honour of Odecumbe in Somerset, were Bocland, Putteford, Bulkeworth, Sutton, and Uppecoth in Devonshire.¹² In 12 and 13 John, Richard Briwere held fifteen fees of the land of Walter Brito, of the honor of Hattecomb (Odcomb).¹³

As regards the branch of the family of Brito which settled in Dorsetshire, it is related in the Black Book of the Exchequer that during a vacancy of the Abbey of Milton the custody of

(10). Mag. Rot.

(12). Testa de Nevill

(11). Inq. p.m. 49 Henry III no. 5.

(13). Lib. Rub.

the abbey was committed by Henry I to Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, for five years. During that period the bishop converted a tenement, consisting of two hides and a half, and held by William, son of Walter, from a "feodum censuale" into a knight's fee, but it was afterwards restored to its original tenure, and it so continued in 12 Henry II, when it was held by William Brito, the heir of William, son of Walter. A "feodum censuale" differed materially in its nature from a knight's fee, for while the latter owed military service, the former was merely charged with an annual tax or quit rent to the church, or monastery, and sometimes certain other non-military services, in return for which the owner was entitled to the protection of the church. The fee just mentioned was probably at Sydling St. Nicholas,¹⁴ but the manor in Sydelince, which was held by Anserus at the Domesday Survey, seems to have been in Upsidling, for on the collection of the aid granted on the marriage of Isabella, sister of King Henry III, to the Emperor Frederic II, the collectors account for 16s. 8d. for one fee of Morton, in Upsitling, of the fee of Odecumbe.¹⁵ William Briton, of Sidlis (Sydling), died about 2 John, for in that year Brian de Insula gave to the King 120 marks, and one palfrey to have the custody and marriage of his children, with all their inheritance.¹⁶ Thomas Brito was his son and heir, and on the partition of the knight's fees of William Briwere amongst his co-heirs, one fee in Sidelich, co. Dorset, then held by Thomas le Breton, was allotted to Margaret de Assertis.¹⁷ Thomas le Breton married Alice, one of the co-heirs of Brian de Insula, and had for her fortune the manor of Stardeclive in the county of Derby.¹⁸

The Brets of Sandford Bret, co. Somerset, were probably a branch of this family. Collinson (III 543) shows them to have

(14.) See further notice of this in Hutchins's *History of Dorset*, 3rd edition, vol. iv. p. 496, communicated by the writer of the present article.

(15.) Testa de Nevill.

(16.) Rot. de oblatis.

(17.) Testa de Nevill.

(18.) Fin. Conc. Devers Cos., 19 Henry III, no. 65.

been descended from Simon Bret, whom he considers to be identical with Simon Brito, who in 12 Henry II, held half a fee of William de Moun. There is no doubt that the Brets of Maperton in Dorsetshire were of the same family as this Simon, for, in 9 Richard I, Henry le Bret owed in Dorset 100s. to have right respecting one fee in Maperton against Simon le Bret.¹⁹ Collinson says that Simon Bret had a son Richard whom he considers identical with Richard Brito, notorious as one of the murderers of Thomas a' Becket. If such is the case it is remarkable that, of the four knights who participated in that foul deed, three of them, viz., Reginald Fitz Urse, Hugh de Morevil, and Richard Brito were connected with Somersetshire. But I have met with no contemporary evidence to connect Richard Brito with this family or this county. The Pipe Rolls are silent respecting him.

Contemporary with the Britos of Somerset, other distinguished families of the same name flourished in Essex, Norfolk, and Suffolk.

(19). Mag. Rot.
