

## Taunton under the Normans

Extract from a Lecture 'Sidelights on the History of Taunton'

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TAUNTON has never been a town of great military strength. Contrast it with our neighbour, Exeter, where a large part of the old walls still remain, and if you follow their circuit you can appreciate the great natural strength of the site when it was bounded by these walls. On the other hand, Taunton was built on flat ground without natural protection, except a short stretch of river, and had no walls. Hence it would appear that the history of a town like ours is wrapped up in the history of the people who dominated the neighbourhood.

At the time of the Norman Conquest, Taunton was probably merely an agricultural centre. It had peculiar reasons for attachment to the Saxon kings owing to the Royal forests in the vicinity, and to the fact that Godwin had large possessions in the west of England.

Two years elapsed after the battle of Hastings before the south-western counties were conquered. There is no record that William ever came to Taunton, but the various commotions in the neighbourhood would have given its inhabitants great anxiety. The mother of Harold, in her flight from Exeter to the Flat Holme, may have rested here and been received with sympathy and pity by her former subjects. Then William came storming down to subdue Exeter, laying waste the country as he passed. His line of march was the main road from London to Exeter, then as now skirting the southern side of the Blackdown Hills, near enough to make the Saxon Tauntonians tremble as fugitives came in with the story of his harryings.

In the same year Somerset was attacked in the north by its

former owners. The sons of Harold made an unsuccessful attempt on Bristol, and in revenge for their defeat they ravaged the land between the Quantocks and the Bristol Channel. They landed and sacked the country in the valley of the Axe, and then nearer to us they attacked the settlements in the estuary of the Parrett. The villages were destroyed so thoroughly that at the time of the Domesday survey, eighteen years afterwards, Combwich, Durborough, Stowey, Stoke Courcy, Stringston and other places in that area had not recovered from their visitation. When the panic-stricken survivors came hurrying over the Quantocks to seek safety, the inhabitants of the town must have thought of the stories of Danish raids handed down from their ancestors.

After this we may suppose that Taunton came really and actually under the rule of the Normans, and that the natives, cowed by the misfortunes which had overtaken their neighbours, were ready to accept their new masters. The manor remained the property of the Bishop of Winchester, now a Norman, and it may be hoped that the men of Taunton Deane were ruled more peaceably and justly than they would have been by some quarrelsome baron. The surrounding country was divided for the most part between certain followers of William, though the king and the church continued to hold much land. Robert de Mortain, de Mohun, Arundel, de Courcelles and the bishop des Coutances obtained scattered estates, each of considerable size. To Walter de Douai was granted the land round Bridgwater, and to Alured of Spain and de Falaise, property on the northern side of the Quantocks.

The west of England was not yet entirely subdued. Robert de Mortain, the Conqueror's half brother, was his governor in this district. He had built himself a castle at Montacute, and it is surmised that he also fortified Neroche. Montacute was held in peculiar reverence by the Saxons; before the battle of Hastings, Harold himself, at Waltham Abbey, had knelt before the stone crucifix which had been found on the 'pointed hill' and removed thither.

The year after the fall of Exeter, the men of Somerset and Devon rose in revolt against the taxation imposed by de Mortain and attacked and besieged him at his castle of Mon-

tacite. William was busy with a rebellion in the north, and sent the warlike bishop des Coutances to the rescue of de Mortain. The bishop raised the leveys of London and Winchester and quickly overcame the local forces. 'He slew some, mutilated others and put the rest to flight.' If he followed the custom of William, the mutilation of the prisoners consisted of cutting off the right hand and putting out their eyes: some unhappy wretches who had been thus maimed, perhaps groped their way back to their relatives at Taunton. This unchristian bishop then completed his victory by laying waste the country adjoining his return march. Ile Brewers and Hatch were the nearest villages to us to be destroyed by him.

Before the next period of war, Taunton had undergone certain changes. A castle had been built and a priory founded. So that when Stephen seized the throne this was probably a larger and more important town than it had been previously. Already at the time of the survey it had had sixty-four burgesses.

What was the position of the townspeople during the anarchy? England fell rapidly into the state of horror and terror so graphically described in the following oft-quoted passage—

They forced the folk to build them castles, and when the castles were furnished, they filled them with devils and evil men. They took those whom they suspected to have any goods, both men and women, by night and day, and put them in prison for their gold and silver and tortured them with pains unspeakable.

Another chronicler says concerning the country people in the West-country—

They ate the flesh of dogs and horses; they ate raw herbs and roots. In some places they died in herds of famine, in others the harvests rotted in the fields because the farmers had perished or were fled.

Each baron became an absolute king over as much country as his forces enabled him to control. It should be remembered that they were foreigners to the people of the country-side, men whose profession was war, and employing mercenaries who fought for the highest bidder, and fought in the merciless fashion of those days when the lives of civilians were con-

sidered of no value except for the purpose of ministering to the wants of the fighting-man.

An aged and invalid bishop once said to the writer that it must have been a glorious life to have been a knight in the middle ages—to fight until you began to get old and stiff and then to get killed. Excellent times they were, no doubt, for the baron or knight, but not so happy for the inhabitants of a small township.

We are told that in the western counties, 'castle warred against castle and baron against baron', and clearly Taunton had an interesting though perilous position during the anarchy as the centre of a minor civil war. Ownership had changed somewhat since the Domesday survey. Three of the large estates had been broken up; those of de Mortain and the bishop des Coutances on account of their rebellion against Rufus, that of de Courcelles for some other reason. The king still held much land in west Somerset. Mr. St. George Gray has proved by his excavations that Castle Neroche was occupied at this time: it was in a royal forest and so probably was held for Stephen. The castle and manor of Taunton were held by Henry, bishop of Winchester, the king's brother, who was on his side except for one short period. Old Cleeve belonged to de Romara who was created Earl of Lincoln by Stephen and obviously was his supporter. Williton, Withycombe and Wootton Courtenay were the manors of Fitzurse who is believed to have had a castle somewhere on his property. He was on Stephen's side, and with him was his neighbour, de Bret of Sampford Bret and Milverton. The family of de Bret was allied to that of Fitzurse, though it held land under de Mohun.

On the side of the empress were de Mohun, 'the scourge of the west', lord of a great castle at Dunster and of an extensive barony; and de Courcy, a member of Matilda's household, who had acquired the manors of de Falaise and added others on the shore of the Bristol Channel. He had his castle at Stoke Courcy. The castle at Nether Stowey belonged to de Candos who held much of the land formerly granted to Alured of Spain. Either he must have embraced the cause of the Empress or have had an unenviable time between his two powerful neighbours. A Fitzpaine of Cheddon was sheriff for

the county in the early years of the reign of Henry II, and so had possibly been a supporter of Matilda, but as the family had larger possessions both in Devon and Dorset, there is no reason to think that they lived at Cheddon. Away to the east, Castle Cary was held by Lovel, and to the west, Tiverton and Exeter by de Redvers, both of whom opposed the king.

So, of the leaders whose politics are known to us, we have the owners of the coast castles and of Tiverton and Castle Cary for the empress, and those of Taunton and of a stronghold in the Williton neighbourhood for the king, who also himself may have garrisoned Neroche.

Besides the important landowners, already mentioned, there were other great men holding manors in west Somerset, some of whom resided here, whose allegiance seems not to be known. Probably many of them took the opportunity to carry on their private feuds. Among these were de Douai in the Bridgwater district, and Arundel who had also much land in Devon and Cornwall and may have been non-resident. Beauchamp of Hatch, with property extending from Stoke-sub-Ham, is believed to have had a castle on the eminence where now stands Hatch Court. The ruins of the castle of the Hidons, owners of Clyst Hydon and Clayhidon, may still be seen at Hemyock over the Devon border; and there was still a castle at Montacute.

There are many notable names among the lesser landowners who held manors either directly from the king or from the greater barons:—de Erleigh held manors at North Petherton, Durston and Creech;—de Fleuri at Combe Florey;—Goathurst at Goathurst;—de Crowcombe at Crowcombe;—Halsey at Halsway;—Malet, the descendant of William's standard bearer, was at Enmore;—de Estre at Aisholt;—de Gomer at Stogumber;—Stawel at Cothelstone.

According to the law of those days no subject could fortify his residence without express licence from the king. When Stephen and Henry of Anjou came to terms towards the end of the reign, there were eleven hundred and fifteen unlicensed castles in England. Most of these were dismantled under Henry II. In the troublous times of the anarchy everyone would have fortified his home who was powerful enough to do

so. A proportion of these west Somerset knights must have lived on their manors and converted their houses into some kind of castle, or at any rate strengthened their defences.

It is known that the shores of the Bristol Channel were held for Matilda when her cause was almost hopeless in the rest of the country. He would be a very peace-loving and tactful knight who could live hereabouts between de Mohun, de Courcy and Lovel and not take an active part either for or against them. Some, perhaps, followed the banners of the king or empress with more or less fidelity; others probably changed their nominal sovereign in order to be on the opposite side to a neighbour against whom they had a personal grudge, in either case making themselves a dangerous and terrifying ingredient in the life of those whose occupation was agriculture or commerce.

Imagine then what must have been the position of Taunton, an unwallled town, clustering under the protection of its castle, the manor extending into the enemy's country. Only by leaving their houses undefended and taking refuge with their goods behind the moat of the castle could the inhabitants hope to save their lives and part of their property from lawless marauders and the armed followers of the empress.

William de Mohun opened the campaign here by laying waste the country-side; presumably he confined his depredations to the estates belonging to the adherents of the king which included the outlying parts of our manor. Then Stephen himself besieged de Mohun at Dunster Castle, and probably ravaged the lands of its lord and his allies. The ferocious Lovel of Castle Cary laid waste the country in his district and was also honoured by a siege from the king: later in the reign he was besieged by Tracey on behalf of Stephen.

These sieges are historical facts, but no record remains of the attacks and reprisals, minor ravagings and skirmishes, which must have occurred near here during more than a dozen years, keeping the townspeople of Taunton cowering under the walls of their castle in semi-starvation through the wasted condition of the country-side, and hardly venturing even in daylight to go out of sight of their priory church.