

STOKENHAM OCCASIONAL PAPERS

General Preface

The purpose of these occasional papers is to put on record information collected during a continuing study of Stokenham parish, so that the information remains readily available and does not drop back into obscurity.

In each paper, the document or event which is recorded is supported by sufficient additional information to give it a context and a background. Each paper deals with a single topic and stands along.

W. A. Roberts

BOOK 3 : CONTENTS

SETTLEMENT IN STOKENHAM

Using some new information, this paper aims to give a clearer story than has hitherto been available of the pace at which the parish of Stokenham was progressively settled and occupied during the past ten centuries.

PRETTEJOHN by Peter Cowell

For almost 500 years the name Prettejohn has been woven into the Stokenham story. Mr. Cowell contributes an account written after a long study of the descent of this family and its links with other well known local names.

STOKENHAM CORN MILL

Through many centuries the watermill at the western end of Chillington was central to the life of Stokenham manor and parish. Its great water wheel fell silent long ago, and is vanished, but enough evidence remains on site and in documents to reconstruct its story.

SETTLEMENT IN STOKENHAM

This paper aims to bring together some separate fragments of information which, when they are merged, give a clearer story than has hitherto been available of how the parish of Stokenham was progressively settled and occupied during the past ten centuries. Some of the information is new.

The old and new Stone Ages, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age successively left in the parish their artefacts and their earthworks,¹ but no recorded history; and the Romans never made any large scale penetration beyond Exeter and are not evident in the parish.

The story can open with the Saxon settlers who began to arrive in the parish between 700 and 800 AD behind the military forces of the newly unified nation as they swept for the first time westwards beyond Exeter.²

It was a settlement which continued and spread in succeeding centuries. Its initial focus was at Chillington which by 1000 AD was established as the administrative centre of a large Saxon royal estate east of the Kingsbridge estuary. Pioneering families fanned out to make other settlements in the parish and the evidence of that remains in those numerous place names which end in '-ton', a Saxon 'homestead'.

In the middle of the 11th century the area belonged to the Countess Gytha who had been given it as part of her dowry by King Canute when she married Earl Godwin.³

When Gytha's son, King Harold, was defeated and killed at the battle of Hastings, Gytha left the country. Soon afterwards the Normans arrived in the southwest and consolidated their conquest.

When the king's agents came in 1086 to list and record the possessions which William the Conqueror had won, in the schedule we know as Domesday Book, they recorded four settlements. They were Dunstone, Coleridge, Widdicombe and Chillington, with Hollowcombe as a possible fifth.⁴ That identifies four or five of the most ancient centres of settlement in the parish. It does not mean that there were no others, but only that others were at that time insignificant in terms of potential tax yield or had been swept up in the accounting of the principal centres mentioned.

The victorious Normans then began their long period of feudal control and Stokenham was ruled by lords of the manor for many centuries.²

A basic element of feudal manorial rule was the manorial court. It was the agency by which the lord, through his steward, expressed his will and governed his manor. The court met several times a year and attendance at it was compulsory, under penalty, for representatives reporting from every separate settlement of the manor.

The manorial court rolls which recorded significance, important in the effective and profitable management of the manor. They are of high reliability. Such manorial court rolls are available for Stokenham in a sequence which runs through the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth and Charles I.⁵

A feature of every one of these court records is a listing of the settlements as they make their 'presentments' one by one. One of the earliest available court rolls, for the year 1528, shows the settlements listed below and offers a secure indication of the stage of settlement which had been reached in Stokenham by that time:--

Stokenham

Muckwell

West Kernborough

Mattiscombe	Bickerton	Molescombe
Widewell	Downe	Well & Aller
Widdicombe	Hollowcombe	Chillington
Beeson	Kellaton	Darnacombe
Huckham	Cotmore	Frittiscombe
Middlecombe	Moysen	Coleridge
Batton	East Kernborough	Dunstone

Prawle, Borough, Woodcombe and South Allington were at that time also in the manor and were regularly listed. Start does not appear because it was part of the lord's home farm or demesne. Well and Aller were always bracketed and that was often the case for Cotmore and Moysen and for Batton and Muckwell.

The positions of these listed settlements have been indicated approximately on the map of Figure 1. It is immediately evident that the interior of the parish had been extensively and evenly settled by 1528. The 4 principal settlements of Domesday in 1086 had been extended to 24 by 1528. There had evidently been a surge of colonisation and settlement within the parish during that interval.

What is also strikingly evident from Figure 1 and from the list earlier given is the conspicuous absence of settlements along the coastline. In 1528 they did not exist.

The reason is that for centuries the coastline had been an unsafe place to live because of the constant risk of raiders from the sea. Even in the centuries of late BC when the Iron Age settlers made their fort behind Frittiscombe (the place now called 'Slapton Castle') they set it well back from the sea so that they and their wood smoke would not be conspicuous to roving sea raiders searching for plunder: while they themselves would have visual notice of any alien vessels entering the estuary (then unimpeded by the sand bar).

The same cautious attitude to coastline living remained until Tudor times. There are certainly many early references to the activities of fishermen on the coast and to their fish cellars, stores and workshops, notably at Hallsands and Torcross.⁶ But there were no communities having their homes on the shore. Just like the Iron Age people, they made their homes a little back from the coast in hamlets such as Widewell, Beeson and Bickerton.

By the time of the Tudors that fear of coastal residence was disappearing. Occasional families were beginning to live on the coast but they were still represented at the manorial courts through the inland settlements until their numbers grew sufficiently to require direct representation. The manorial court rolls are again helpful in providing precise information. On 28th March 1602, in the 44th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Torcross suddenly appears for the first time in the list of settlements sending representatives to the manorial court. Similarly, on 5th July 1627, in the 3rd year of the reign of Charles 1, Hallsands made the first of its regular appearances on the manorial list and thereafter was always present. Beesands made no appearance in these Tudor rolls. Its emergence as a settlement was much later, though there too there had been references to the activities of fishermen long before.

Up to this point, the picture of initial settlement and its steady extension through the parish has been based on documentary evidence. That picture can be checked and expanded by evidence taken directly from the landscape. The additional information can be obtained by the application of the proposition now widely accepted, that the age of a hedgebank can be estimated in centuries by a count of the tree and shrub species occurring within a representative length of it; the relationship being one century per species.

In an area of developing and spreading settlement such as that now under consideration it can be expected that the general age of hedges in any district will be an index to the arrival of settlement

there. In the summer of 1980 the writer made a species count in hedgebanks on either side of every road throughout Stokenham parish.⁷

There were 574 counts and when they were plotted against a date scale the relationship of Figure 2a appeared. Figure 2b shows a comparable curve for Devon generally, drawn from previously published information,⁷ and that curve is similar.