

## Normans, Domesday and the fate of the Saxon nobles

By 1066, the Bishop of Wells owned the manors of Beazenhanga and Hwete Circe - Binegar and Whitchurch. Edward the Confessor gave them to Bishop Giso in 1065 – the year we celebrate the founding of Holy Trinity Church.

Bishop Giso restored the fortunes of Wells, building a cloister, refectory and dormitory for the Cathedral canons (priests). It was not to last.

Giso died in 1088. William II – Rufus – appointed John of Tours as Bishop of Wells. William of Malmesbury, the medieval chronicler, called him “a very skilled doctor, not in theoretical knowledge but in practice”. They say he got the job as reward for being physician to the King’s father (William the Conqueror).

Before Giso was cold in the grave, John of Tours upped sticks and moved to Bath, making Bath Abbey his Cathedral. Moving cathedrals was common among Norman bishops. He was a rotter, though, leaving Wells desolate for the next 50 years.

Up to then, the canons elected one of their number to be *Provost*, in charge of the estates, including Binegar and Whitchurch manors. On leaving Wells, Bishop John gave the estates to his steward Hildebert. Hildebert promptly evicted the canons from the home Giso had built for them. They had to find their own lodgings and, as best they could, live off the pittances Hildebert provided. The buildings fell into ruins and all Giso’s work was undone.

Matters got worse. Another John, the Bishop’s nephew and the Archdeacon of Wells, became *Provost*. He claimed the lands were his hereditary right subject only to a charge to support the canons. The next Bishop, Godfrey, tried to reclaim the property but failed. Provost John had powerful friends at Court.

All of this sorry history – whirling over the manors of Binegar and Whitchurch – may explain why the Domesday Book records neither manor. Come to that, it does not record a town or market



Whitchurch Farm, 1974

at Wells, just a large estate belonging to the Cathedral with a manor house built near-by.

The manor of Beazenhanga occupied roughly the land we know today as Binegar Parish. If there was a manor house, its location is lost.

At its very northeast tip, just beyond the old Court Hotel at Old Down, Beazenhanga joined or rather kissed Hwete Circe manor. This was a long, thin strip of a manor, some six fields wide but extending north almost to Old Mills on the Farrington Gurney to Paulton road, Ston Easton to the west and Clapton to the east. There, at its centre, still stands Whitchurch Farm, its original manor house.

There is no record of what settlements there were. There would have been a few houses around Holy Trinity Church and along Gurney Slade with water mills at Gurney Slade Bottom and on Wellow Brook, north of Whitchurch Farm.

With the Domesday Book, we reach 1086. Hwete Circe and Beazenhangra Manors are now, it seems, our Parish and will be for the next 851 years.

The Domesday Book reckoned the Cathedral's lands to be 280½ hides. A hide started life as the Saxon measure of land worked by one plough to support one family – about 120 acres. By Norman times, a hide was more a measure of value than area. In Domesday, a hide was land that produced an income of £1 a year. The amount of land needed for this varied, of course, with its quality.

The total income from the Cathedral's land was £315 a year. Modest, you may think but it equates to around £11 million today. Cathedrals did not come cheap.

With the Cathedral lands lumped together, Domesday says nothing of who lived *here*.

Pre-conquest, a Saxon nobleman, a *Thane*, would hold our lands from his overlord, the King. When Edward the Confessor gave the Manors to Giso, the Bishop of Wells became overlord. After the Conquest, the Normans got rid of the *Thanes*.

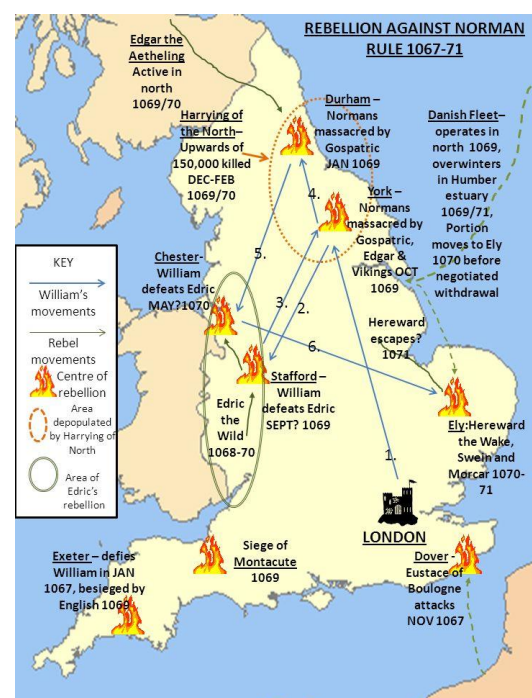
Saxon *Thanes* generally met unhappy ends. Our *Thane* – we do not know his name - may have been with Harold when he fought the Danes at the battle of Stamford Bridge or the Normans at the battle of Hastings.

If he survived these, our *Thane* was probably part of the Saxon resistance to Norman rule that soon sprang up in the west.

He may have taken part in the hopeless Saxon revolt at Montacute. The Saxons besieged *Mons Acutus* Castle, newly built in 1066.

They suffered defeat, of course, at the hand of the battling Bishop of Coutance. "A fighting bishop?" you ask. This was not so unusual. Geoffrey de Montbray was the Bishop and his brother, Malger, had fixed his election. The circumstances were fishy and Geoffrey was accused of simony – buying the See – near enough a deadly sin. At the Council of Reims, Geoffrey's defence was that his brother, not he, made the purchase, he knew nothing of it and was shocked to learn of it. Heard that one before?

Geoffrey fought at Hastings and was a great supporter of William I. William rewarded him with lands all over England, including Emborough Manor. According to one chronicler, at Montacute, "the doom of the vanquished was dreadful".



The Saxons' last real stronghold had been Exeter and, as William and Geoffrey marched on the city, its inhabitants slammed shut its gates. The resistance was fierce and many died but, after 18 days, Exeter surrendered and that was that, until the next time.

If our Thane got through all that, back home, he had better watch out for Azelin Gouel de Percheval. He held Richmond Castle, East Harptree and the Manor of Ston Easton (among others) for Bishop Geoffrey de Montbray. Azelin's nickname was *Lupus*, "the Wolf", from his violent and uncontrollable temper. He glowered over Somerset from behind the walls of Richmond Castle, ever ready to strike.

Azelin was progenitor of the great family of Perceval and, by a younger son, of the barons of Harptree and Gournay from whom our own Gurney Slade takes its name.

#### **Sources:**

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