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Anglo Saxon Lighthorne and the Norman Conquest

by Peter Hinman (1999)

Danish Incursions.

During the later years of the Saxon period, when Britain was suffering from repeated incursions and forced settlement by Scandinavian peoples, mostly from what is now Denmark, Lighthorne was again at the frontier.

Most of Warwickshire lay outside the Danelaw, which extended approximately from the north-west to the south-east of England, officially following the line of Watling Street. Scandinavian place names occur in the north east of the county; Rugby, Kilsby, etc., exist alongside Saxon names like Bilston and Dunchurch. The cluster of now deserted medieval villages around Avon Dassett was granted a market in 1297 which was known as Chipping Dasset. "Chipping" is from the Scandinavian "köping", pronounced "chirping" and meaning a market. (The same word is the origin of the modern word "shopping".) Also some fields alongside Chesterton Woods were known as the Sych or Such, which is another Scandinavian word meaning the furthest, referring to the furthest field from Chesterton. These names may well be later than the Danelaw, having been adopted into the English language over the centuries since the end of Danish control. The furthest penetration of settlement where the Danish place names survive as indicators of the language of the original settlers would seem to be the adjacent villages of Princethorpe and Eathorpe on the Fosse Way.

Lighthorne and the surrounding area almost certainly suffered from Danish raiding parties at the end of the Saxon era. During Ethelred's rule from 975, King Sweyn of the Danes ravaged and occupied so much of the Kingdom of Wessex that he came to be called the King of England. His son, known to us as King Canute, was expelled from Britain after Sweyn's death but returned with reinforcements and sacked Warwick in 1016, along with much of the south and east of the country. As a result, the old Warwick castle, built by Ethelfleda, the daughter of Alfred the Great and Mother of Edward the Elder or the first King of the English, was fortified against further attacks.

At the time of the Norman Conquest, fifty years later, Thurkill, the Saxon Lord of Warwick, was maintaining a force of seven warriors at the old Roman fort at Chesterton, certainly to protect the Lighthorne and South Warwickshire area against further incursions by Danish raiding parties travelling down the Fosse Way. Seven warriors may not seem many to us today, but would have represented a severe deterrent to any raiders who were not properly armed and equipped. Five of these soldiers are recorded as having land at Chesterton at the time of the Domesday Book in 1086. They were supported by four and a half ploughs according to Domesday. It is not known where the other two soldiers of the garrison were billeted, possibly at Tachbrook. Danish raiding parties are known to have penetrated as far as Worcester, where the skin of one luckless Danish prisoner used to hang on the back of a church door as a symbol of neighbourliness.

The Norman Invasion and Domesday

Thurkill must have been a major figure in the district; after 1066 he was first recognised as the administrator by William, Duke of Normandy, but by the time that Domesday was written in 1086 his lands had been granted to Henry de Newburgh, the first of the Norman Earls of Warwick.

According to Domesday, Lighthorne had been held by Ralph prior to the conquest. This is believed to be, without confirmation, Ralph, Earl of Hereford, who is thought to have fallen at Hastings.

Another Saxon citizen of the district who played a significant part at the time of the conquest was the then Bishop of Worcester, Wulfstan, a native of Long Itchington. He co-operated with the Normans in the early years and worked very hard to integrate the invaders and the indigenous peoples, Saxon, Celtic and Scandinavian, into one people, actions for which he was subsequently sanctified.

Although Domesday was a major undertaking, the first comprehensive assessment of England's commercial value since Roman times, it is not always realised that this work was almost entirely done by the indigenous monks of the Saxon dioscesan structure. The monks, or clerks, of Wulfstan of Worcester certainly wrote the entry for Lighthorne, a village which Wulfstan possibly knew personally. Wulfstan's co-operation helped him very little, as he was replaced by a Norman bishop.

With the coming of the Normans, Lighthorne changed from being at the frontier to being at the centre of England. The influences of the earlier years would continue to affect Lighthorne for many years, particularly from the results of enclosure and the actions of the Lollards, Anabaptists and 'landless men', for whom the Forest of Arden, so close across the Fosse, was a centre of activity.