

THE MYSTERY OF THE BLACK MOUND

by Dr. Christopher Cox

The Hundred of Blacklow (the Black Mound) includes in the Domesday Survey: Alkerton (= Eastington), Frampton-on-Severn, Fretherne, Frocester, King's Stanley, Leonard Stanley, Stonehouse, Wheatenhurst (alias Whitminster), and Woodchester.¹ Whether these names represent the (perhaps later) parishes is a moot point, but need not concern us here.

These parishes or estates lie on either side of the lower course of the Frome from below Stroud to its confluence with the River Severn at Framilode.² But with one exception — Woodchester.

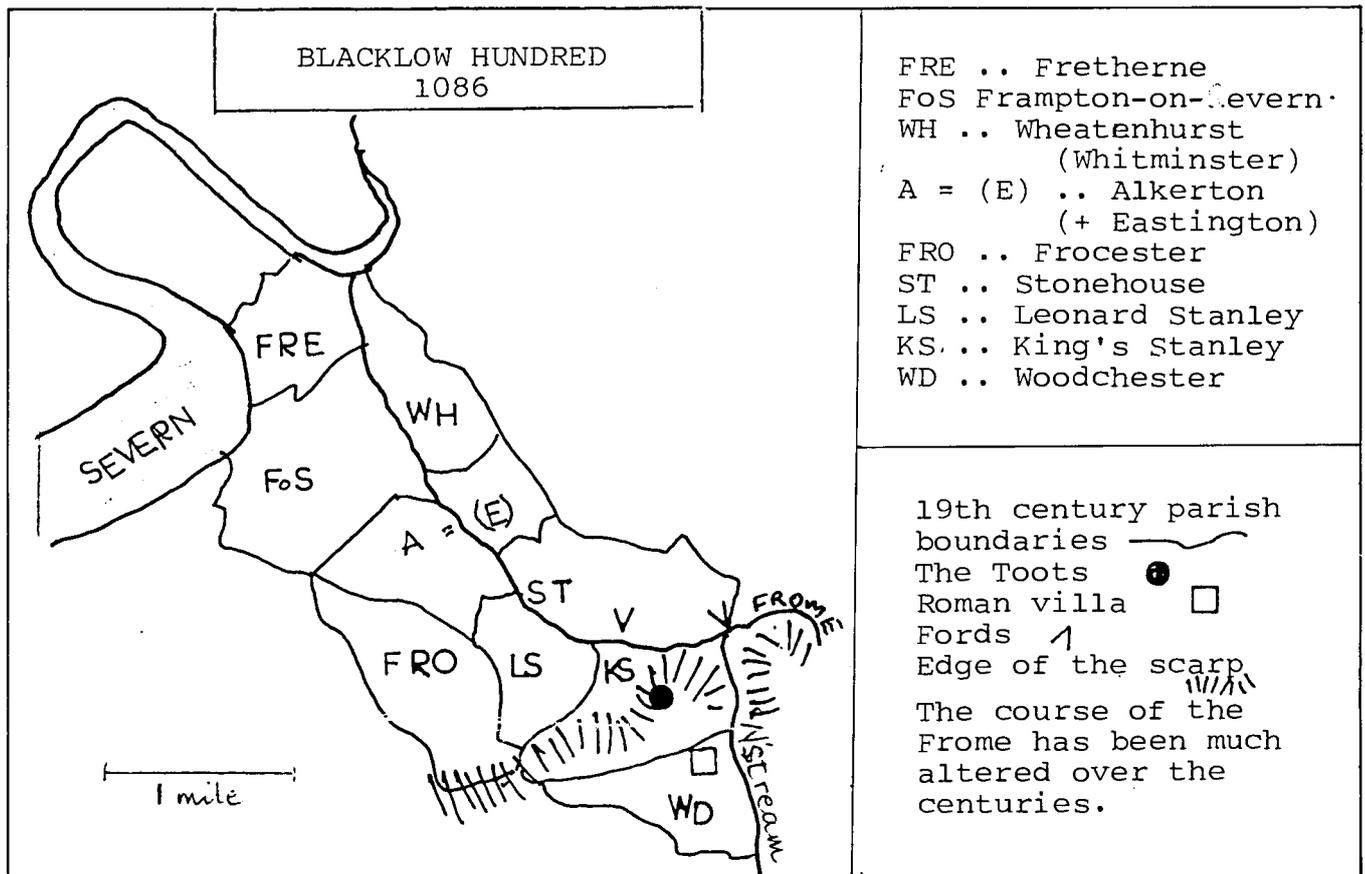
Woodchester is nowadays a small triangular parish on the western flank of the lower Nailsworth valley, and has no direct connection with the valley of the Frome. This anomaly has to be explained, so the first part of the problem is what was "Woodchester" at that time?

Two "Woodchesters" are recorded in Domesday.³ One was in Longtree Hundred, held before the Conquest by Gytha, mother of Earl Harold, and the other was in Blacklow Hundred, held TRE by Brictric. It is likely that the Longtree "Woodchester" corresponds with the tithing of Rodborough on the eastern side of the valley,⁴ but eventually both sides of this valley were brought within the Longtree Hundred, and the Hundred of Blacklow does not appear again after Domesday, the Vale parishes being reconstituted into the Hundred of Whitstone. So the problem can be restated: why was this anomalous "Woodchester" included in Blacklow Hundred, and (as a corollary) where was the meeting place of the Hundred? Though recorded in Domesday as two estates, "Woodchester" earlier was of much greater extent with lands on both

sides of the Nailsworth valley. A charter of 896 A.D.,⁵ resolving a dispute between the lessees and the owners of lands attached to the estate makes this clear, when the witan summoned to Gloucester ordered a survey of the lands in question, which was carried out by Ecglafr, the "geneat" or agent of Aethbald the lessee, and Wulhum, the "ceaster setne preoste" or "Citizens' chaplain," of whom more below.⁶

This raises intriguing possibilities, as to whether there was any form of territorial continuity between the Roman villa of Woodchester and the Woodchester of the Saxon period, though this is not the place to venture too far into such a speculative quicksand.⁷ But it seems obvious that pre-Conquest "Woodchester" was a more than ordinary estate, perhaps a lingering echo of the great Roman villa, the ruins of which would then still have been above ground: the Norman church (since replaced by another on a different site) used Roman materials in its construction, as the curious visitor may still see from the scant remains of that edifice.

This conjecture provides an explanation as to why Blacklow Hundred included "Woodchester" — the estates in the Vale could well have been land attached to the more prestigious estate in the Nailsworth valley. It must be remembered that in the earlier period before the Conquest estates were of some considerable size, only later being sub-divided into smaller manors or parishes, perhaps in response to the troubles of the Danish incursions, perhaps also in the reconquest by the West Saxon kings of Midland England when the older Mercian units of administration were completely replaced by the more familiar shires.⁸



The meeting place of the Hundred (assuming the above is accepted) would thus be conveniently close to the most important estate of the group, that is Woodchester. Such meeting places were often named after (and identified by) a recognisable feature, such as a tree (as in Longtree or Grumbald's Ash), a mound (Brightwells Barrow, Blacklow), or the most important part of the estate (Berkeley, Westbury).⁹

To reach such an assembly point the various tithingmen would need to set out at first light, and some of them would have a considerable distance to travel. In the case of Blacklow Hundred, there *is* a well-known and conspicuous landmark which could well serve the purpose. This is the long barrow on the verge of Selsley Common, known as The Toots. It has in the past been carefully bisected so that now it presents the appearance of two barrows, but despite this rough surgery and the erosion of time it is still a recognisable and outstanding feature on the long, level profile of the Common. The tithing men approaching from the more distant Vale estates would follow tracks on the terraces on either side of the Frome, utilising fords such as those at Ryeford and Dudbridge to approach the stiff climb up to the top. Against the light of the sun rising in the east, both the Common and the mound itself would stand out in stark and clear silhouette for much of the way until on near approach the swell of the hill took the landmark below the line of sight. From say Stonehouse to Ebley even today it is clearly to be seen as an obvious landmark: in the days when there were fewer buildings (and no tall chimneys) to distract the eye, it must have been an invaluable guiding mark for travellers.

This, then, it is suggested is the Black Mound from which the early Hundred was named. It seems possible that after Domesday Woodchester lost its predominance, shrinking to its later parish size, while the parishes in the Vale were more suitably grouped into the Hundred of Whitstone.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Domesday Book names etc. are taken from *Domesday Book: Gloucestershire*, Moore JS (Phillimore, 1982). Blacklow appears variously as Blachelew, Blaechelev, Blaechelave, Blachelev. The Langetrev Woodchester is Vdecestre, the Blachelov one Widecestre
2. "The Frome emerges from the Oolitic escapement at Stroud, crosses the sub-edge plain as far as Stonehouse in a deep trench, and thence in a shallow valley flanked on the south-west, round Frampton, by a wide spread of oolitic gravels." Wills LJ, on the Pleistocene of the Lower Severn in *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society* xciv, 1938, 161
3. Moore JS op cit: 1.63 and 78.14
4. See e.g. Watson CE "The Story of the Manor" *TrBGAS* liv of 1932. He has suggestions as to the identification of places named in the Perambulation; these have however not all been positively identified
5. Text and translation given in *TrBGAS* 5, for 1880—81, Appendix A
6. While the Witan (or Court of Inquiry) was held in Gloucester, possibly at the royal palace at Kingsholm, Wulfhun, "ceastersetna preost", is clearly the representative of the bishop, as Ecglaf for the defendent, Aethelwald. The seat of the bishop was at Worcester, so the "ceaster" is on balance of probability the city of Worcester (Kingsholm palace—see C Heighway, *Gloucester—a History & Guide*, A. Sutton 1985, p35)
7. See e.g. Finberg HPR "Some early Gloucestershire estates" in *"Gloucestershire Studies,"* (Leics 1957) and his suggestions of continuity in boundaries from Roman to Saxon times in "Roman and Saxon Withington," (Leics Univ. English Local History Paper 8, 1955). See also Sarah T Wool's Bristol Ph.D thesis, *"Fundus and Manerium: a study of continuity and survival in Gloucestershire from Roman to Medieval Times"* (Bristol Univ, 1982). Michael Wood, *Domesday, a search for the roots of England* (BBC 1986) has some interesting remarks on the likely continuity of some sort between post-Roman and English times (see his ch. iv).
8. For the Hwicce, see Hooke D, *"The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: the Kingdom of the Hwicce"* (Man. Univ. 1985).
9. Anderson OS, *"The English Hundred Names"* Lunds Univ, (no date); a full and interesting study of the origins and meanings of Hundred names.