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A Doughton Charter Re-Assessed

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By E.F.M. PRINCE

A CHARTER in the *Liber Wigornensis*¹ purporting to be a copy of one by King Offa, granting five 'manentes' in the 'vicus' called *æt ductun* and five *æt esig* to the monastery of St Mary at Worcester, has been characterised as 'suspicious' by Stenton and as plainly spurious by other commentators. Finberg² describes it as follows:

Undated, but attested by Bishop Wermund,³ like CS 210 from which the formulas appear to be copied. The bounds of Eisey are given in Old English, a feature not found in genuine texts of this date; and the reference to Saint Mary's is another anachronism.⁴

A study of the place-names of Doughton will, I think, show that the bounds given in the charter are in fact those of Doughton in the parish of Tetbury, Gloucestershire, and not those of Eisey (or Eysey) in the parish of Latton, Wiltshire, and indeed may suggest that the charter is by no means entirely spurious. It must be admitted, however, that some features of the charter are puzzling and indicate that if it is based on a genuine charter some distortion of that charter has occurred in this version of it, written some three centuries after Offa's time. Finberg was, I think, right to be put it in his category of 'charters thought to be fundamentally a fabrication, but which may embody some authentic material or record a genuine transaction'. But how much of it is authentic?

The charter is headed DE DUCTUNE ET DE ESIGE. and after some conventional pious formulae goes on:⁵

Ideoque, nunc terram v manentium hoc est vicū⁶ qui nuncupatur æt ductun & v æt esig. pro eterna salute mee anime quandoque in futuro dante deo ad monasterium sancte marie uocabulo weogorna ceastre in ius ruris ecclesiastici libentissime perdonans concedo. Sunt hi termini ruris illius. ærest of winterburnan into mægþanwyl-
lan. of mægþanwyl-
lan on puttan crundel. of puttan crundelle on bradan beorh. of bradan beorge on þone
ellenstub. of þan ellenstubbe on þone ufemastan hangran þurh ufemastan hangran on risweg. of riswege adune to
þære dene and lang þære dene to ægan stane. of ægan stane on mærweg. andlang mærweg on pumere. of pumere
on bedewellan. of bedewellan suðriht on winterburnan

Here is a translation with suggested derivations of the parts that affect the argument (the words in italics are all Old English):

1. B.L. Cott. Tib. A X 111, ff. 42, 170–171v.; CS (Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*) 109.
2. H.P.R. Finberg, *Early Charters of W. Midlands* (Leicester, 1961), p. 39 (no. 34).
3. And thus 775 × 779 AD if genuine.
4. It is an anachronism because St Mary's was not founded until 962 AD, but Finberg allows some charters as genuine which contain a later 'updating' in this form, e.g. *op. cit.* no. 23.
5. I follow the version of B.L. Cott. Tib. A X 111, ff. 170–171v.
6. This would normally represent *vicum*, but *vicus* is required here.

Concerning Doughton (*duce*, duck; *tun*, farmstead) and Eisey (? *es*, a god, or *Esa*, personal name; *eg*, an island, a piece of dry ground in fenny land). . . . This is the village which is called *æt ductun* (*æt*, at, in older documents an integral part of many place names) and *v æt esiq.* . . . These are the bounds of that estate: first from Winterburn (*winterburna*, a stream that only flows in winter) to Mayweed well (*mægþan*, gen. sing. of *maegþe*, mayweed) or Maidens' well (related to *maegden*, maiden, nun; *wella* spring, well) from (Mayweed) well to Putta's quarry (*Putta*, personal name) or Kite's quarry (*putta*, kite, hawk) from (Putta's) quarry to Broad barrow (*brād*, broad; *beorg*, barrow, tumulus) from Broad barrow to the Elder stump (*ellen*, elder tree; *stub*, tree stump) from the Elder stump to the uppermost hanger (*ufemest*, uppermost; *hangra*, a wood on a steep hillside) through the uppermost hanger onto Brushwood way (*bris*, brushwood; *weg*, way, path – possibly brushwood laid down to make a causeway over marshy ground) from Brushwood way down to the Dene (*denu*, a valley) along the Dene to Æga's stone (*Æga*, personal name) from Æga's stone to Boundary way (*(ge)maere*, boundary) along Boundary way to Plumtree (*prūme*, plum tree or *plūme*, plumtree – with dissimilatory loss of r or l: cf. Puncknowle, Dorset, *Pumernolle* 1202) from Plumtree to Bidwell (*byden*, vessel, tub) from Bidwell due south to Winterburn.

The first puzzle is whether this charter does in fact refer to one village or two. As the bounds 'come full circle' they must refer to two contiguous villages, or we must assume that the bounds of one of the villages were not given in the first place; or that for some reason they were lost during the course of transmission down the centuries.

In favour of the hypothesis that these are contiguous villages that could be regarded as constituting one estate is the fact that the singular is used – 'hoc est vicū' and 'ruris illius'. If this were so, and if one of the villages is, as I hope to show, Doughton, the other cannot be identified with Eisey, which is some fifteen miles away. The only estate which bounds with Doughton, and which seems at all likely to have ever been joined to it, is now called Elmstree [*Elmztri:*] and it is, on the surface of it, plausible to imagine that there is sufficient phonetic similarity between its pronunciation and an older pronunciation of Eisey, which must have been something like [*Ezi:*] for a scribe writing from dictation to have confused Elmstree with Eisey. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine early pronunciations that would make such a confusion likely, as the earlier written forms we have for Elmstree are *Aeðelmodestreow* in 962, *Ermundistre* in 1189 and *Elmondestreo* in 1201. In fact the earliest form we have suggesting a pronunciation something like the modern one is *Elmystre* in 1464.⁷

On the whole it seems more likely that the bounds of the 'other' village were at some time lost, perhaps because an earlier version of the charter had become damaged and partially unreadable, so that a scribe attempting to produce a plausible version of what may have seemed an unpresentable charter, had to resort to copying from a genuine charter, namely CS 210 (Finberg, no. 35), to supply the parts that were missing. He copies the initial formula slavishly, and when it comes to 'ideoque nunc terram octo manentium, hoc est vicū qui nuncupatur aet euangelade (Evenlode). Sunt autem termini ruris illius . . .', though he remembers to change the eight manentes to five he fails to change the singular to plural to allow for the fact that he should now be referring to two villages. Similarly when he uses the archaic-seeming forms 'aet ductun & aet esig' he may be copying the Evenlode charter. On the other hand, when it comes to putting down the bounds of the estate, he is clearly not imitating it, for the Evenlode bounds are basically in Latin with only the place-names in English, whereas his bounds are expressed totally in English. Whatever else is unclear, this is clearly clumsy; but no matter whether it is a clumsy forgery or a clumsy attempt at reconstruction, the scribe seems to have had some sort of access to a set of genuine bounds, though perhaps not of Offa's time.

It is my contention that these bounds correspond so well with the geography and later

7. Elmstree forms are from A.H. Smith, *Place Names of Glos.* (E.P.N.S., 1964), i, 112.

place-names of Doughton that they must be in some sense genuine, and that they do not refer to Eisey at all.

The bounds start from the *winterburna*. The stream that flows along the modern boundary of Doughton to the south is known as Shipton brook or Stayle brook, but as it dries up almost completely in even the wettest of summers (though it is sometimes a torrent in winter) could aptly have once born the name 'Winterburn'. If we assume that the point at which these bounds start is due south of Bidwell (see below) this makes it at the point where the bridge (now known as Underbridge, formerly Underwood bridge) crosses this stream (at O.S. Nat. Grid 885991). About 200 yds south-west of this and about 30 yds above the 'Winterburn' is a constantly flowing spring which is nowadays piped into a stone cattle-trough. This is still of some economic importance, and must have been much more so in bygone days as one of the few sources of water when the 'Winterburn' was dry. This I take to be the 'Mayweed Well' (or Maidens' or Nuns' well) (at 883909).

In the north-west corner of the next field at about 880918 is an area of irregular shape where the ground has evidently been excavated to no great depth but is now much silted up. It appears consistent with the well-documented local practice of digging stone that could be easily won by splitting as close as possible to the point at which it was to be used. This I take to be 'Putta's (or the Kite's) quarry'. In the next field to the west is a large barrow (at 878886) which has given its name to the field recorded as *Barrow Field* (18th century), *Tump Ground* (1838)⁸ and, perhaps, *Bergehaye* (1613). This surely must be the *bradbeorg*.⁹

From here on the line of the boundary is less certain, partly because of the relatively ephemeral nature of some of the boundary marks. The *ellenstub* for example is unlikely to have lasted for a human generation, let alone 1200 years. There is a field abutting the boundary of Doughton in the neighbouring manor of Charlton which was called *Yelstubbes* in 1624¹⁰ and *Hailstubbs* in 1799,¹¹ but this is about as far away on the boundary of Doughton as one could get from the position required by this charter. *Ellstub* is, however a common and widespread place-name and might have occurred anywhere. There is nowadays a large clump of elder bushes at 869906 by 'the Causey' (1629),¹² now a farm track but for centuries the main Bristol road. This would be about where one would expect the boundary mark to be. It is probably a coincidence, but, interestingly, from this point to the modern main road to Bath and Bristol, runs what in many parts of the country would be called a balk, but which in the parish of Tetbury seems always to have been referred to as a 'mound'. This is a bank about eight feet high, and, though the hedge on top of it now is quite young, the remains of ancient tree stumps can still be seen. These probably represent descendants of the trees which grew in the hedge in medieval times, if not in Offa's day. Most of the major medieval boundaries in the parish seem to have taken this form. It is very similar in structure to what was called 'the ditch hedge', which marked (and still marks) the boundary between the parishes of Tetbury and Beverstone. It is, however, rather taller.

8. Glos. R.O., GDR T1/178, Tetbury tithe award, 1838.

9. Incidentally, Rudder (*New History of Glos.* p. 730) mistakenly writes that the barrow 'was probably thrown up immediately after the battle fought at Sherston between the English and the Danes, about the year 1016, wherein the latter were routed, and have left their name to another field just by it, called *Danes End*.' Apart from getting the date of the barrow wildly wrong, Rudder was evidently misled by the local pronunciation, for the field is in fact *Denes End* (*Deans End* in 1838: Tetbury tithe award; and 'the deanes end' in 1657: Glos. R.O., D 191), that is 'the end of the valley'.

10. Glos. R.O., D 340A/T101.

11. Glos. R.O., D 587, map of Charlton estate, 1799.

12. This and all subsequent dated place-names are from Glos. R.O., D 191.

Similarly there is no real sign nowadays of anything that could be called the *ufemest hangra*, but logic requires that it should have run along the northern boundary of Doughton from about 856910 to somewhere in the region of Highgrove. Although there is a curious semantic similarity between the *uppermost hanger* and Highgrove, the name of Prince Charles's house is unlikely to be a direct descendant of the charter name, for the name Highgrove appears for the first time when the house was built in 1796–8. *Hangra* is usually glossed as a wood on a steep slope. There is no steep slope at any point on the boundary between Doughton and Elmstree, but the ground does fall away fairly steeply over the boundary towards Happylands (a modern name) and if the hanger extended to this slope it might account for the name.

The *riswey* might then have run along the line of the footpath which goes from near Highgrove house to 884923, where it would reach the bottom of the valley, albeit a shallow one (*adune to baere dene*). This valley does not seem to have any modern name, but in the 13th century it was called *Hirwoldesdene*, from the Old English personal name 'Hygewald'.

If one then turned right (*andlang baere dene*) one would reach what is now the main road from Tetbury to Bristol and Bath within about two hundred yards. I have searched this area for anything that might be the *ægan stane* but without success; but stones are removable. The *mærweg*, boundary way, would then follow if my hypothesis is correct, the line of the main road.

If I am right in deriving *pumere* from *prumer* or *plumere* one would expect to be able to identify it with the field still called 'Plummers' (*Plomers Leases* 1647, *Plumbers Ground* 1802), but this field is about half a mile away from where it should be if my argument is correct; it lies behind Highgrove house. It is possible, of course, that two different plum trees gave rise to two similar place-names in different places in rather the same way as the elder stump may have done. It does seem an odd coincidence, but I can think of no better explanation.

As to *bedewella* one can be more confident both as to the identification and location. We find *Bidwell* in 1650 and 1713, *Bidwell mead* 'near to Doughton' in 1742, and *Biddles Mead* in 1772. In 1650 it is said to abut *Blacken Groves*, which is the field on the north side of the Tetbury–Bristol road near the turning to Shipton Moyne. There is still a well in the corner of the garden of Underbridge Cottage (at 884916) which is probably the Bidwell. If you go due south (*sudriht*) from there you come within a quarter of a mile to the bridge over the 'Winterburn' and thus bring the bounds full circle.

It seems to me that there is too close a correspondence between the names in this charter and the geography and recent place-names of Doughton for it to be at all likely that it could refer to anywhere else, but it may be as well to rehearse the negative evidence concerning Eisey. That parish lies on a flat plain in the angle between the River Thames and the Roman road known as Ermine Street. Quite apart from the fact that it would have been almost impossible to describe the bounds of Eisey in Offa's (or anyone else's) day without referring to these two features, the Thames is certainly no 'winterburn' at this point, for I have canoed down it in high summer. There is no hill within the manor that could have held a 'hanger', nor is there anything that could have been called a 'dene'. In short, the topography of Eisey could never have resembled the land described in this charter; and if the bounds of Eisey were ever included in any version of it, they are not these in the version that has come down to us.

The evidence from place-names, though circumstantial, seem almost conclusive that this charter does refer to Doughton, and at least in that sense contains something genuine, however garbled it has become. There is one small piece of evidence that it could possibly derive from a genuine charter of Offa's. William of Malmesbury¹³ relates that after the battle of Bensington

13. *Gesta Pontificum* (Rolls Ser.), p. 389.

King Offa seized land near *Tettanminster* (Tetbury) which Ethelred of Mercia had given a century earlier to the monks of Malmesbury, and gave it to the Bishop of Worcester. Though this relates to land in Tetbury's Charlton, Doughton is also in the parish of Tetbury and for a short distance abuts Charlton, and our charter could represent a logical parallel transaction. Whether the battle of Bensington took place in AD 771 as the Anglo Saxon Chronicle suggests, or in AD 779 as William of Malmesbury says, both would be consistent with the attestation of Bishop Wermund. Hodgkin suggests very tentatively that at this time Offa was concerned with establishing some sort of natural frontier (though not in the modern sense) between Mercia and Wessex, whereas Stenton refers to the reoccupation of 'debatable land'; and it is possible that this charter represents part of this process. A line running from the headwaters of the Thames near Ewen through Rodmarton, Tetbury, Doughton, Didmarton and Tormarton and down to the Severn would make a sensible 'frontier' and it is perhaps significant that three of these names probably contain the Old English word for a boundary, *(ge)maere*.

But that is speculation. All that can be said with reasonable certainty is that the charter does refer to Doughton and is not entirely spurious.

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