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**Iron Acton: a Saxon nucleated village**

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## Iron Acton: a Saxon nucleated village

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It is now generally agreed that the pattern of nucleated village settlement and concomitant open-field system was broadly a development of the late Saxon period, but with considerable regional variation in the date of its adoption. Some villages were laid out as late as the 12th century. Unwin has argued that early nucleation is most likely in areas of early Saxon settlement not later overrun by Scandinavians.<sup>1</sup> In north-east Gloucestershire, a Saxon charter for Adlestrop refers to 'Rahulfes furlong which is in the field of Evenlode', a clear indication of open-field agriculture, and a 10th-century charter of adjacent Daylesford gives boundary points north-west and south of the *tīn*.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of *tīn* evolved over the centuries from 'fence' or 'hedge' to 'enclosure' and, by extension, to 'farm' or 'estate'. It later denoted the focal point of an estate – 'farmstead, village' – and emerged in modern English as 'town'. Place-names ending in *tīn* appear to proliferate in the middle and late Saxon period, probably reflecting a preference for *tīn* to describe a village.<sup>3</sup> A charter of Teddington dated 977 states that the lands granted are both near the *tīn* and away from it, which certainly indicates a nucleus of settlement.<sup>4</sup> At Iron Acton an unusual combination of factors makes it possible to deduce that the village antedates Domesday.

### *A divided village*

The Domesday survey of 1086 recorded two manors at Acton, later known as Iron Acton, in the Bagstone Hundred of Gloucestershire. In 1066 they had been held by Ebbe, a man of Brictric son of Algar, and Harold, a man of Alfwy Hiles. Ebbe's estate had passed to Geoffrey, bishop of Coutances, and was held from him by Ilger. Harold's estate had been granted to Maud of Flanders, queen of William I, and before her death in 1083 she had granted it together with the manor of Wickwar to Humphrey the chamberlain, who was probably a member of her household.

In 1086 Humphrey the chamberlain held two and a half hides at Acton valued at 40s. Ilger also held two and a half hides valued at 40s. Ilger had one and a half ploughs, while Humphrey's manor included half a plough. The obvious interpretation is that one plough-team was shared between the two manors. In the same way, Ilger had half a mill and Humphrey one and a half mills, so it would appear that a mill was held in common. The way in which the vill was so evenly split suggests that Acton was originally a five-hide unit, divided before 1066 between two heirs.<sup>5</sup> An example of such a division is at Butcombe (Avon, formerly Somerset), where Wulfwaru left her estate to be divided equally between her eldest son and youngest daughter, sharing the principal residence 'as evenly as they can'.<sup>6</sup> Many places named in Domesday were divided between two or more manors, but it is generally difficult to establish the boundaries between them. At Iron Acton the boundary was preserved by an unusual circumstance.

After the accession of William Rufus in 1089, the manors which had belonged to Maud of Flanders were granted to Robert FitzHamon and became the honour of Gloucester.<sup>7</sup> The honour included the valuable manor of Thornbury, which became the *caput* of a wider estate. Wickwar and the half of Acton that had been held by Humphrey became a knight's fee (or two half fees) held from Thornbury.<sup>8</sup>

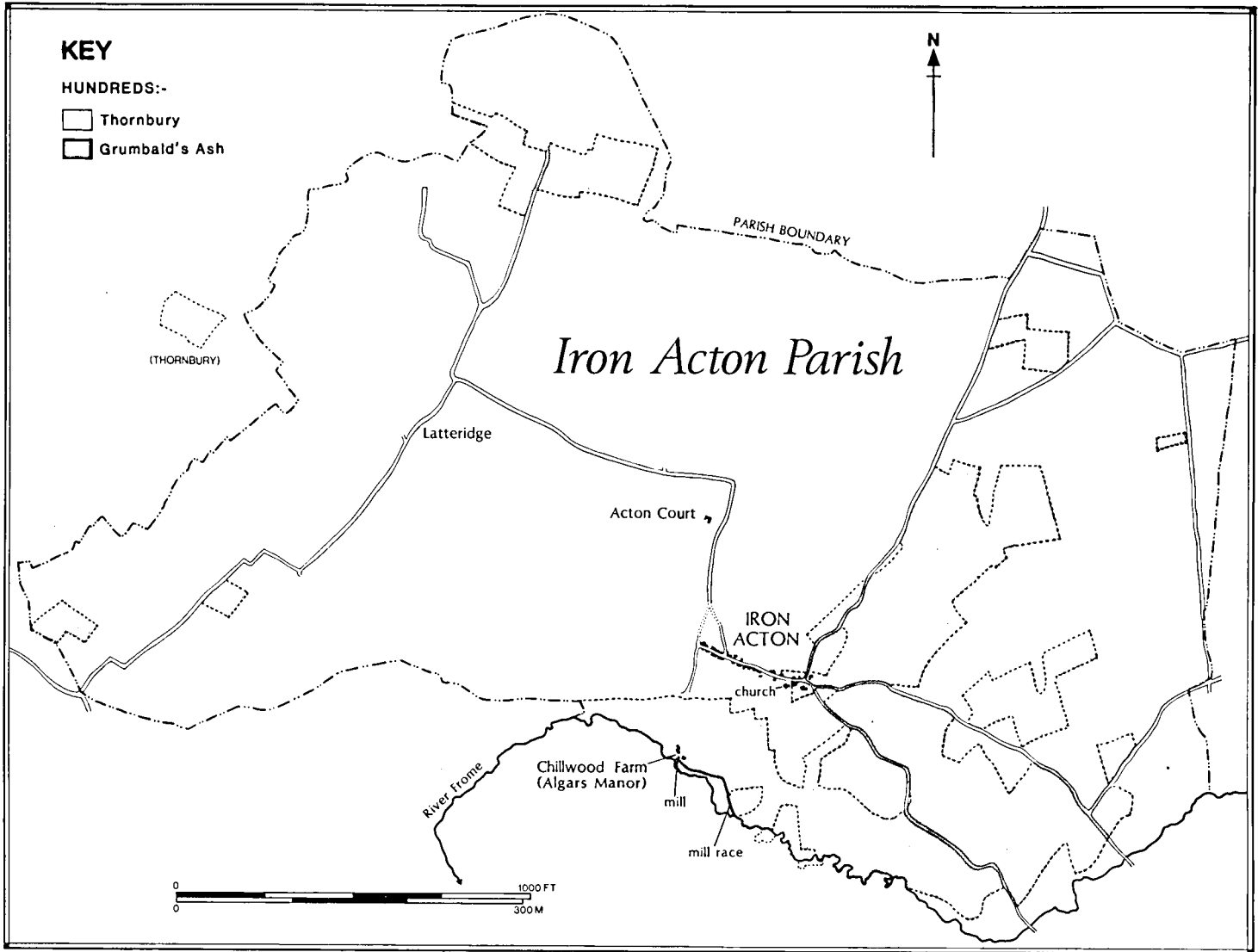


Fig. 1 The parish of Iron Acton 1881 (Ann Linge)

Under the Normans some of the Saxon hundreds recorded in Domesday became increasingly inconvenient units of administration. Bagstone hundred disintegrated as manors held from Thornbury were drawn into a new hundred of Thornbury and the remnant was evidently too small to survive as a unit. In 1220 it was known as the hundred of Agmead, but by 1303 it had been absorbed by the hundred of Grumbald's Ash.<sup>9</sup>

The two manors within Iron Acton parish were therefore in different hundreds. The hundred boundary was not mapped until the 19th century and in this late form may incorporate adjustments following land enclosures. However the relationship between the boundary and the village is significant. The 1881 Ordnance Survey map shows Thornbury hundred encompassing the western half of the village with the church of St. James, whereas part of the eastern village from the churchyard wall was included in the hundred of Grumbald's Ash (Fig. 1). The village is laid out east and west of the church on a regular linear plan, suggestive of a planned settlement.<sup>10</sup> The hundred boundary therefore indicates the division of a pre-existing village.

The church is presumably of Saxon foundation, since it incorporates a Saxon fragment in its fabric. Churches were frequently built by the manorial lord, in which case he had the right to present the incumbent.<sup>11</sup> Such a church was characteristically sited close to the manor house.<sup>12</sup> At Salgrove, Northamptonshire, a late Saxon manorial hall and church were built on the same east-west axis, with the church to the east,<sup>13</sup> which suggests that liturgical considerations influenced the planning of the whole complex. There is a similar relationship between the Saxon church and the hall of the manor house at Little Bardfield (Essex). Such examples have prompted the hypothesis that, topography permitting, there was a preference for placing a proprietary church to the east of the manor house.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the most likely site for the Saxon manor house at Iron Acton is immediately west of the church.

A mill stands close to the village on the river Frome. Since mills tend to remain on the same site, however often they are rebuilt, one or both of the Domesday mills was probably in the same position. The open-field system was certainly in operation in Iron Acton by the 14th century and may be presumed to date from the same period as the settlement.<sup>15</sup>

An equal division of such a settlement would have its complications. Both lords would have rights in the mills and church,<sup>16</sup> and the individual strips of land of the two manors would be intermixed in the open fields. The complex interweaving of the hundred boundaries within the parish of Iron Acton is consistent with such a history (Fig. 1). The rights of the two manors in the church are discussed below. If the ancient manor house was once shared, as at Butcombe, this is scarcely likely to have proved a satisfactory long term arrangement. It would appear that in the later Norman period, when both manors had resident lords, two new manor houses were built, both approximately a third of a mile from the village, one to the north and one to the south.

### *Acton Ilger*

The manor of Acton Ilger, so called from the 13th century, was clearly named after the Domesday tenant, to distinguish it from the other manor at Acton. In the mid 12th century, it was purchased from Richard Foliot by Robert FitzHarding. Robert died in 1171 and his son Maurice of Berkeley had a charter from Foliot confirming his possession of Acton, with 'his part of the church'.<sup>17</sup> Maurice died possessed of Acton in 1190.<sup>18</sup>

The manor appears to have passed to Maurice's daughter Maud, wife of Ellis Giffard of Brimpsfield, for her descendants lived at Acton in the next century. Around 1220 her granddaughter Maud was implicated in a violent crime there. Her husband, Richard Butler of Acton, was fatally wounded in his own house and suspicion fell upon her. Their marriage had

been stormy and she frequently fled to relatives for protection. The jury at an inquest decided that Richard had been murdered by Maud's supporters and at her instigation. The head of the family, her uncle Ellis Giffard, undertook to ensure that she would retire to a nunnery.<sup>19</sup>

In 1247 Ellis held land in Acton for which his nephew Osbert Giffard paid 40s. rent.<sup>20</sup> Osbert's father had converted part of that land, a yardland, into a freehold tenure and in 1255 the tenant granted the yardland to the hospital of St. Mark, Bristol. A rent was still owed to the Giffards, but in 1348 or 1349 it was granted to the hospital by Thomas, Lord Berkeley.<sup>21</sup> Clearly the Giffard estate in Acton had reverted to the Lords Berkeley. Thomas died in 1368 possessed of a sixth of the manor of Acton Ilger.<sup>22</sup>

Acton Ilger had evidently fragmented. Part may have been acquired by John de Marisco (Mareys), knight, who witnessed the deed of gift to St. Mark's hospital in 1255 and a charter relating to Frampton Cotterell in 1257.<sup>23</sup> He may have been the father of Henry de Mareys, who held Acton Ilger as a quarter of a knight's fee in 1303.<sup>24</sup> Henry de Mareys was still alive in 1316, but by 1346, John of Acton, lord of Iron Acton (the other manor), had acquired Henry's quarter fee in Acton Ilger.<sup>25</sup> From this period, the two manors were under the same lordship, though for centuries afterwards documentation intermittently recognised the distinct existence of Acton Ilger.<sup>26</sup>

The manor house of Acton Ilger was presumably the building called 'Marreysplace', which is recorded in a court roll of Iron Acton in May 1381 as leased to John Bampton. A court session in August that same year fined him for offences reported by the ale-taster in Riverfield and Hongers. In 1538 property described as late Bampton's included lands called Chapel Hay, Riverfield, and New Leaze in Hongers, a pasture called El Acre and a mill.<sup>27</sup> The description fits the estate attached to Algars Manor, formerly known as Chillwood Farm, south of the village and close to Acton Mill. The tithe award of 1842 shows that the land of this farm included a pasture called 'L Acre' and land beside the river, all in the hundred of Grumbald's Ash. The name Algars Manor is a 20th-century invention, but the site nonetheless appears that most likely for the manor house of the de Mareys family.<sup>28</sup> This house may have had its own chapel, indicated in the field name Chapel Hay. The present house incorporates a medieval open hall, which was remodelled c. 1600 by John Crowther, whose descendant of the same name purchased the freehold in 1683.<sup>29</sup> In the late 18th century, there was still some recollection of Chillwood's former manorial status. In Acton Ilger 'Thomas Nelmes Esq. has an estate and manor, or reputed manor, called Chillwood, formerly belonging to the Crowther family'.<sup>30</sup>

### *The manor of Iron Acton*

Humphrey the chamberlain's heir or successor was evidently Henry de Orescuilz.<sup>31</sup> In the 12th century Henry and his descendants seem to have made their chief residence at Sandford Orcas on the border between Dorset and Somerset. After the death of Richard de Orescuilz in 1206 his lands were divided between his sisters and Maud of Harptree evidently gained the bulk of Humphrey's Domesday manors in the West Country, which descended in 1234 to her grandson, Robert de Gurney.<sup>32</sup>

Humphrey had no tenant in Iron Acton or Wickwar. His estate there was probably run by a steward or bailiff from a central farm in the larger manor of Wickwar. The later pattern of feudal tenure (see below) indicates that Wickwar was the dominant manor of the pair. However, in the 12th century Iron Acton gained a resident lord.

The family which took its name from Acton was recorded from the mid 12th century. William of Acton witnessed five charters of Earl William of Gloucester (1147–83). All are undated, but one can be dated from internal evidence to c. 1155–60.<sup>33</sup> This and three of the

other charters were written by a scribe who was dead by 1176, so William would appear to be the antecedent of John of Acton, who was fined for a forest offence in Gloucestershire in 1176.<sup>34</sup> References in 1195 and 1201 to the same or another John of Acton failing to perform military service and as a knight assisting the justices of the eyre in 1221 or 1222 suggest that he held land in Iron Acton by knight service.<sup>35</sup> Later evidence confirms this. In 1287 John of Acton, lord of half of the vill of Iron Acton, claimed that his grandfather John had a gallows in Iron Acton in the time of King John.<sup>36</sup> The tenure of Iron Acton manor at this period was a complex feudal chain. In 1284 or 1285 John de Acton held it under the name of its hamlet of Latteridge from Roger de la Warre, lord of Wickwar, who held it of Anselm de Gurney, who held it of the earl of Gloucester as one knight's fee of the manor of Thornbury.<sup>37</sup>

The grant by Richard Foliot to Maurice of Berkeley referring to 'his part of the church' suggests that the advowson was originally shared between the two manorial lords, perhaps alternating between them. It seems likely that the lords of the manor of Iron Acton became sole patrons from the time that Acton Ilger fragmented, although the evidence is inconclusive. The earliest recorded presentation to the church of Iron Acton was on 15 February 1273, when John of Acton presented his son John.<sup>38</sup> The next rector of Iron Acton, William of Welborne, was instituted on 6 August 1294 and the patron is not named.<sup>39</sup> By 1306 William had been replaced by John of Hawkesbury, but the latter's institution is not recorded. On 16 August 1323, John was replaced by a royal chaplain, Thomas of Tormarton, Edward II being at that time patron. John of Acton's lands were in Crown hands after the battle of Boroughbridge.<sup>40</sup> On 27 February 1327, Sir John of Acton presented Andrew of Raleigh to the church of Iron Acton.<sup>41</sup>

The united manors of Iron Acton and Acton Ilger passed from Sir John of Acton to his nephew John Poyntz in 1364 and remained in the Poyntz family until 1683.<sup>42</sup> The manor house of the Poyntzes was Acton Court, to the north of the village. Excavations begun in 1986 have uncovered several phases of building, the earliest of which is 12th-century.<sup>43</sup>

### *Conclusion*

It would appear that Iron Acton was a Saxon five-hide unit, with a planned village and open-field system, which was divided into two equal parts before the Conquest. Both manors had resident lords by c. 1200, with manor houses to the north and south of the village, at Acton Court and Algars Manor.

### *Acknowledgements*

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