

Black Country Parish Boundaries

Echoes of Ancient Territory

by

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The network of local Anglo-Saxon territories, estates and townships has left its imprint in the form of our historic parish boundaries. Although this is an incomplete record, and one which is difficult to interpret, the boundaries of ancient parishes, as documented in the enclosure and tithe maps of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, can offer clues about patterns of settlement and land use over a millennium earlier. This article discusses local pre-Conquest land units, royal estates and minster parochiae as well as the development, in the late-Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods, of our familiar system of parishes. It is an edited version of a two-part article first published in the June and September 2017 issues of 'The Blackcountryman', the 50th anniversary magazine of The Black Country Society.

1. Introduction

Most people will be familiar with the word 'parish'. To many, it will simply have ecclesiastical connotations, but those interested in local or family history will undoubtedly have encountered the parish as a long-standing unit of civil, as well as priestly, administration. Indeed, the parish forms the framework for a great deal of local-history research. For many hundreds of years, it has been not only the area served by a parish church, but also the legally-recognised unit through which the local community was organised, taxed, educated and (in later centuries) recorded.

The ancient system of parishes was reformed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result of the 1889 *Interpretation Act*. This paved the way for many of the parish's civil and ecclesiastical functions to be delegated to new administrative entities named, logically enough, Civil Parishes (CPs) and Ecclesiastical Parishes (EPs), the former being governed by a parish council and taking on responsibility for such matters as local services. Population growth had resulted in the building of new churches within the bounds of the original parishes (which are now usually called Ancient Parishes), and many of these churches became the centres of new, though geographically smaller, EPs. Similarly, the CPs were also (at least partially) a response to increases in population density. Their boundaries, which were recorded on contemporary Ordnance Survey maps, often corresponded to natural divisions between population centres, divisions which seem, in many cases, to be representative of a very ancient pattern of settlement and township boundaries (§5).

The new EPs and CPs were introduced in a piecemeal manner over an interval lasting well into the twentieth century; and, to complicate matters, there was not always a one-to-one correspondence between the boundaries of the new CPs and EPs. Fortunately for local historians, the geographical extent and dates of inception of these new parishes, as well as information on their parent Ancient Parish, can be found in numerous online sources. This article will, however, focus just on Ancient Parishes which I will refer to simply as 'parishes' from now on. It is not practicable to give a detailed account of the development of each the Black Country's parishes; even if such fine-grained information could be recovered, it would probably fill a whole book! Instead, I want to introduce a few more-general points and describe how the parishes' boundary patterns, names and historical associations are related to ancient settlement and land use in the region.

2. Parish boundaries: stability and formalisation

The pattern of parish boundaries is very old, and contained within it are the remnants of even older—sometimes very much older—land boundaries. Indeed the boundary pattern is an incredibly rich record of the historical processes of estate formation, fragmentation, reorganisation and transfers of "ownership". However, it is a difficult record to interpret, and one has to resort to complex comparisons with the landscape, place names and (where available) documentary sources. Detailed parish records typically go back only to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries so rarely tell us anything about the parish's origin. The parishes themselves were founded between the mid-tenth and mid-twelfth centuries as purely ecclesiastical entities. Each was centred upon its own parish church; and some parishes also incorporated secondary places of worship known as chapels of ease. These served specific areas of the parish referred to as chapelries, and their distribution tended to reflect that of the parish's settlements or townships. The outline of some chapelries resurfaced in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries as the boundaries of modern EPs or CPs.

The parish church was responsible for a range of ecclesiastical functions, including baptisms, marriages and burials; and would also collect tithes from the parishioners, i.e. payments for the maintenance of the church and priest. The tithes due were dependent upon the parish's productive capacity, and for this reason its boundaries came to be jealously protected.

Gradually, parishes began to take on an ever wider range of civil administrative functions, becoming responsible for local taxation, poor relief and, in later centuries, education. People's lives were intimately bound up with the workings of their parish. As Dr Angus Winchester puts it: "*the network of parish boundaries formed an invisible web which both bound families into communities and divided communities from one another*"¹. In many respects, the parish evolved into the smallest unit of local government, and the resulting bureaucratic inertia contributed to the long-term stability of our parish boundaries.

Indeed, there is little evidence for significant change in parish boundaries from their inception in the tenth to the twelfth centuries until the reforms of the nineteenth. The foundation of new EPs and CPs at the latter date usually involved a simple subdivision of the original parish's territory such that its outer boundary was preserved. Although the original parish might then have been eight hundred years old, not all parts of its boundary would necessarily have been so ancient! Some (usually quite minor) changes *did* occur over time, often as a result of boundary disputes between neighbouring parishioners. The parish records of Oldswinford, for example, detail two such disagreements in 1733. Disputes seem to have been more prevalent in areas of so-called intercommoning (i.e. regions shared between neighbouring communities) such as moors and marshland. Here boundaries often weren't formalised until the sixteenth century or later, when increasing pressure to maximise a parish's income led to more precisely-defined boundaries.

More recently, numerous boundary revisions resulted from the 1801 *Inclosure (Consolidation) Act* and the *General Inclosure Act* of 1845, which allowed enclosure commissioners to lay out new boundaries across former common land, both within parishes and between them. This often resulted in artificially straight segments of the parish boundary line. The new boundaries weren't always respected by hedge-lines, however: eighteenth and nineteenth century plans show many examples of fields actually spanning parish boundaries, each presumably representing a private agreement between the landholders and the parishes concerned.

Sometimes, to formalise a right previously held in common with other parishes (e.g. a right to graze cattle in an outlying location), the process of enclosure would create detached portions of a parish—i.e. small fragments of one parish totally surrounded by the land of another—although many of these detached portions were tidied up in the late nineteenth century as a result of the 1882 *Divided Parishes Act*².

Because of all this relatively modern revision, one may have to look to sources such as pre-enclosure estate plans for a representation of the earlier form of a parish boundary—although the complete parish outline is not always shown on such plans, particularly in the vicinity of common land. In many cases, however, tithe plans, enclosure plans and early Ordnance Survey mapping can help to fill in the gaps.

3. The local boundary pattern

Figure 1 shows the pattern of local parish boundaries which existed in the early nineteenth century before the boundary reforms and subdivision described above. For the reasons already stated, it is likely that this pattern is similar to the one which existed throughout the Norman and late medieval periods, and it is thus a reasonable model of the Domesday boundary pattern.

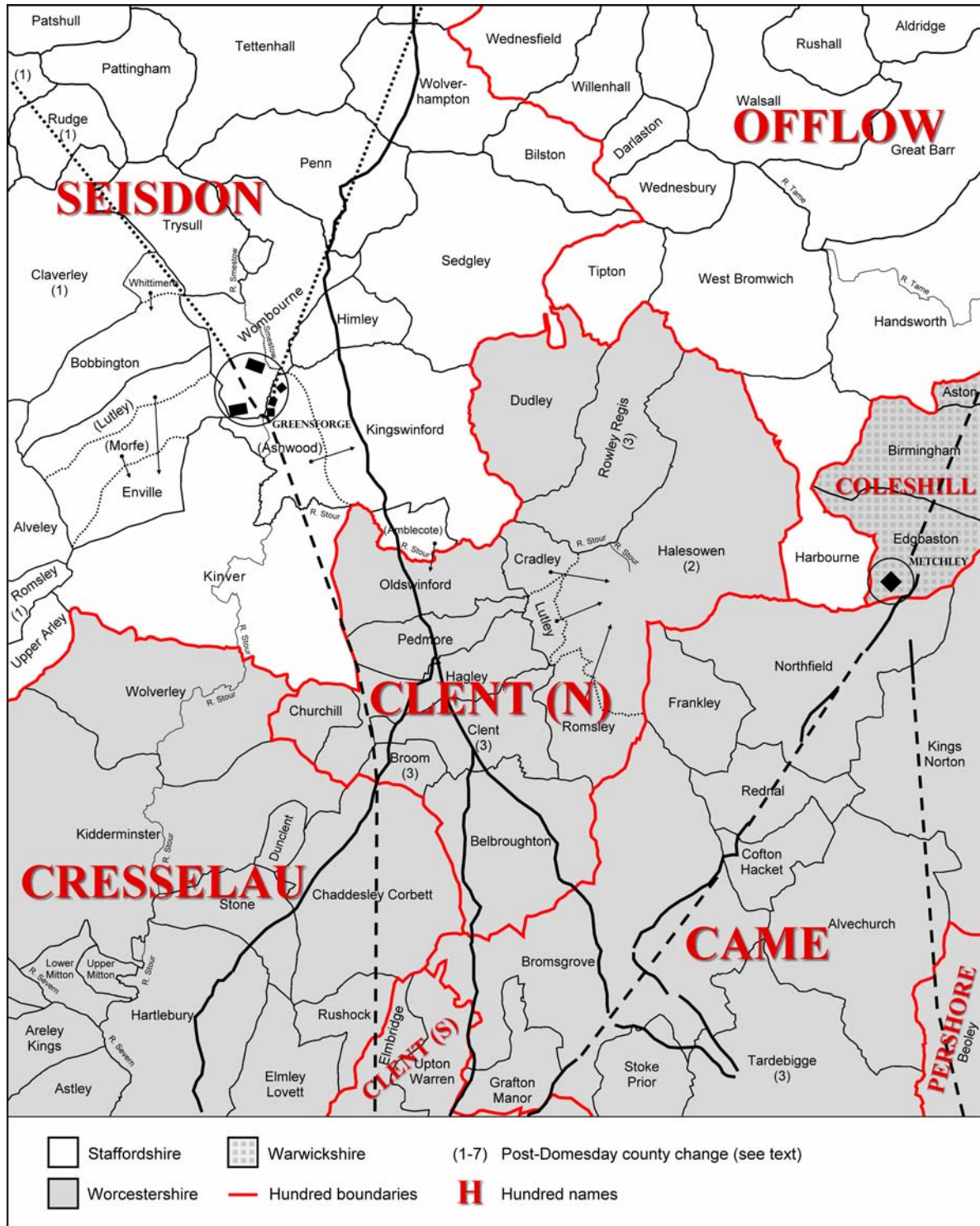


Figure 1. Ancient parish boundaries. Important early routes are also shown in black: the dashed lines represent Roman roads (uncertain sections are shown dotted); the solid lines represent other ancient routes (partially after King³). The county and hundred affiliations indicated are, as far as can be ascertained, those which existed in the immediate pre-Conquest era.

The Black Country, of course, occupies the central tract of the upper half of figure 1: land to the south of the Black Country is shown for regional context and will be discussed later in this article. But first we'll take a short detour from the theme of parishes to discuss the significance of some larger entities: counties, hundreds, dioceses and rural deaneries, all of which are related to the land units from which our network of local parish boundaries evolved.

3.1 Counties and hundreds

In addition to parish boundaries, figure 1 also depicts the distribution between counties of each parish's land at c. AD 1086. The parish of Oldswinford was unique in this region as it straddled the county boundary: its northern section, Amblecote manor, resided in Staffordshire, while its southern section, Oldswinford manor, lay in Worcestershire—although the whole parish (including the Staffordshire part) belonged to the Diocese of Worcester. Elsewhere in figure 1, the parishes lay wholly within one or another of the counties and, as far as can be ascertained, the boundary between the dioceses of Worcester and Lichfield conformed broadly to the county boundary.

Shortly after the Domesday survey, however, the situation became considerably more complex. A number of parishes, or rather, the secular manors on which they were based, were transferred piecemeal into different counties resulting in a messy and confusing mix of county affiliations which persisted throughout the late medieval period. The most relevant of these transfers are listed in table 1. This reorganisation left several detached enclaves of one county within another (e.g. Worcestershire's Dudley surrounded by the lands of Staffordshire), an arrangement which endured for many hundreds of years. Eventually, in the nineteenth century, attempts were made to rationalise this fragmented allocation of land when the *Counties (Detached Parts) Act* of 1844 authorised the transfer of Halesowen, Tardebigge and Upper Areley to Worcestershire, and Alveley to Shropshire. Further, more radical, changes followed in the twentieth century, culminating in the 1972 *Local Government Act* which led to the birth of the Metropolitan Boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton in 1974.

In the medieval period, the counties had been the highest level of local government. They served important judicial and military functions and were the main unit of local taxation, being responsible for collecting royal revenue from their constituent estates. They seem to have developed from an earlier system of boroughs, i.e. land units allocated to the fortified burghs which had been built to defend against Danish incursion during the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries⁴. In the area around the Black Country, burghs were constructed at Stafford, Tamworth, Bridgnorth, Shrewsbury and Worcester; and the lands allocated to each burgh were recorded between AD 914 and 919 in a document known as the *Burghal Hideage*⁵. The counties themselves were formed some time in the tenth or early eleventh century⁶; and the earliest documentary records mentioning local counties by name are dated to AD 1006 (Shropshire), 1016 (Staffordshire) and 1038 (Worcestershire).

Table 1. *Post-Domesday manor / township transfers (prior to the nineteenth century).*

Fig 1 note	Place	Transferred to:
1	Claverley (Staffs.) Romsley (Staffs.) Rudge (Staffs.) Worfield (Staffs.)	a) Shrops. before 1102.
2	Halesowen (Worcs.)	a) Shrops. before 1102 (except for Cradley, Lutley and that part of Warley later known as Warley Wigorn).
3	Clent (Worcs.) Broom (Worcs.) Rowley Regis (Worcs.) Tardebigge (Worcs.)	a) Staffs. soon after 1086. In Domesday survey, all four places were recorded as part of Worcs., but fiscally in Staffs., paying their renders (along with Kinver) at Kingswinford. b) Tardebigge transferred to Warwks. in 1266.

The word 'shire' comes from Old English *scir* meaning 'a division'; and in the west midlands area—i.e. the former Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia—the new shire boundaries were laid out so that each county would be allocated a 1200-hide or 2400-hide share of the kingdom's cultivated land⁷. (A hide was an assessment of the taxability of cultivated land, supposedly being the amount of land capable of supporting one extended household. Although it was not a direct measure of land area, one hide is often considered to represent between 48 and 240 acres, depending upon the quality and fertility of the soil.) Worcestershire had 1200 hides and Shropshire 2400. Staffordshire was unique in having only about 500 hides (the precise Domesday figure is difficult to calculate)⁸. This low hideage is entirely disproportionate to both the county's overall land area and the number of plough-lands recorded there in 1086. It might represent an artificially suppressed assessment of Staffordshire's taxable value, perhaps because large parts of Staffordshire—a Mercian heartland—may have been in royal ownership from an early date⁹.

Because the county boundaries had been devised according to a 1200/2400-hide administrative ideal, their outlines tended to ignore obvious topographical boundary features such as rivers and watersheds. More importantly, they could not, for the most part, respect or preserve the outlines of earlier tribal or folk territories and they sometimes even divided contemporary estates in two.

This contrasts to the situation with certain local hundreds which, in some places, *do* seem to reflect earlier territorial boundaries. Hundreds were another kind of secular administrative unit. Smaller than the county, they were designed (primarily as judicial units) to encompass estates with a combined total of 100 hides of land (hence the name 'hundreds'), and eventually they came to take on responsibilities for local taxation. Hundreds had been conceived in Wessex, perhaps as early as the late ninth century, but weren't implemented in Mercia until the early tenth century.

A charter, which has been dated to between AD 951 and 959, details a grant of Crown land just south of the River Stour from an area then known as Swinford¹⁰. This royal gift resulted in the separation of Kingswinford from Oldswinford, and perhaps the removal of Kingswinford (and probably Amblecote as an integral component of the latter) from Clent Hundred¹¹. Partly on the basis of this evidence, Dr PW King suggests that the northern boundary of Dudley and Kingswinford might even have represented the northern limit of the sixth-to-eighth-century Hwiccan kingdom¹².

Although some elements of hundred boundaries might initially have been based upon earlier territories, many of the hundreds seem to have undergone a degree of reorganisation over time, so it can be difficult to identify these early regions with any great accuracy. Nevertheless, some of the geographically compact hundreds, such as those depicted in figure 1, may well represent earlier territorial units. These probably consisted of so-called 'multiple estates' (§6), some of which may have been centred upon royal villas or places of long-standing importance such as folk moot sites¹³.

3.2 Ecclesiastical divisions

While hundred boundaries may offer a glimpse of a former territorial framework, ecclesiastical divisions such as the diocese, archdeaconry and rural deanery, can sometimes provide more reliable clues to early folk regions. These divisions overlaid the hundreds and counties although, for the most part, they were not coterminous with them.

In contrast to the county and hundred, which were largely designed to meet the needs of government, ecclesiastical divisions were conceived, on the whole, to minister to the needs of people and, for this reason, they tended to be laid out in accordance with 'natural' folk groupings.

The Worcester Diocese, for example, was created between AD 663 and AD 680 to serve the people of the Hwiccan kingdom (which occupied most of the later Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and part of Warwickshire). The kingdom seems to have possessed a long-standing group identity, evolving from the Iron-Age Dobunni people and persisting as a discrete entity (a *civitas*) throughout the Roman occupation¹⁴. It was subsumed into Mercia during the ninth century, but the Worcester Diocese continued to preserve the outline of the Hwiccan kingdom as it was in c. AD 680.

The boundaries of smaller ecclesiastical units can also be informative. Dr D Hooke points out that, although rural deaneries did not come into being until the late eleventh or twelfth century (i.e. before AD 1291¹⁵), Kidderminster Rural Deanery might represent all or part of an earlier territory¹⁶. She

suggests that, because this ecclesiastical division was coterminous with Cresselau Hundred and the northern part of Clent Hundred (figure 1), their boundaries might represent the outline a particularly ancient (and presumably important) territory. This may have been a folk region, or part thereof, belonging to the *Husmeræ* people. It is known from other evidence that the *Husmere* territory was focussed upon the Stour valley near Kidderminster; and the place name Ismere (located between Stourbridge and Kidderminster) derives from this ancient folk name.

The importance of ecclesiastical divisions in understanding even earlier territorial arrangements is underlined by the fact that in some cases, rural deaneries seem to correspond broadly to the *parochiae* of Anglo-Saxon minsters (the first centralised buildings for Christian worship) which will be discussed in §7.

4. The local parish pattern: a reflection of early settlement

Our parishes preserve the names of some of the most important local settlements—often ones which had persisted from post-Roman or Anglo-Saxon times throughout the medieval period—and it is instructive to examine their names in detail. While many of them seem to date from the mid Anglo-Saxon period or later, several apparently earlier names are also present.

The post-Roman period is probably as far back as we can extrapolate on the basis of named land units, as there is only limited evidence of earlier estate continuity. It should also be emphasised that dating a place name is not a precise science. Nevertheless, certain Old English (OE)—i.e. Anglo-Saxon—place-name elements can be identified as being most likely to date from the early eighth century or before¹⁷. Amongst these are topographical elements—i.e. those which refer to the natural, rather than the man-made, landscape. And, of course, it is also possible to recognize names that derive from an even earlier British (Brit) or Primitive Welsh (PrW) root¹⁸.

A cluster of early names overlaps the south-west fringe of the Black-Country and extends some way beyond it, as shown in figure 2¹⁹. It includes: Kinver (Brit *cunobriga*); Enville, formerly *Efnefeld* (OE *efn* + *feld*); Churchill (PrW *crūg* + OE *hyll*); Clent (OE *clent*); Pedmore (OE *Pybba's mōr*); Oldswinford and Kingswinford, together formerly known as Swinford (OE *swīn* + *ford*) or variants thereof²⁰. Ashwood was in Kingswinford parish; and Amblecote probably split from Kingswinford *manor* some time after AD 1016 to become part of Oldswinford parish²¹. It is likely that the latter two places were originally components of an estate or territory represented (approximately) by the northern division of Clent Hundred²² (figure 2). Many important Anglo-Saxon estate centres possessed topographical, or partly topographical, names; and these estates are thought, in some cases, to have developed from earlier folk territories. The cluster of early / topographically-named parishes in and around Clent Hundred supports the impression of a British, or early Anglo-Saxon folk group (perhaps both) in the region; and the survival of these names might imply continuity of both occupation and folk traditions as well as, perhaps, an ongoing recognition of the group's territorial integrity.

To the north-west of Clent Hundred there are several more parishes with seemingly early names: Wombourne (OE *wōn burna*, 'winding stream'); Penn (PrW *penn*, 'hill'); Pattingham (OE *Peatting hām*, 'homestead at *Peatting*'), Patshull (OE *Paetteles hyll*, '*Paettel's* hill'); Rudge (OE *hyrcg*, 'ridge'), and Worfield (OE *Worfe feld*, 'open land near the river *Worfe*')²³. The latter parish is unlabelled in figure 2, but it is depicted spanning the figure's top-left edge. It's unlikely that any of these parishes were associated with the supposed Clent Hundred territory. Indeed, there is evidence that they developed from separate ecclesiastical estates; and, of course, they ended up within Seisdon, rather than Clent, Hundred.

It is probably significant, however, that almost all of the parishes with early names lie on, or very close to, Roman roads or the Iron Age salt-way linking Droitwich and Penkridge (figure 2). The parishes in Clent Hundred connected with both road systems, whilst the groupings around Pattingham and Penn were served by the Roman roads leading to Redhill (*Uxacona*) and Penkridge (*Pennocrucium*) respectively. The early-named parishes to the east clearly lie near the road servicing the Roman fort at Metchley (today adjacent to Birmingham University's campus). It is not surprising that the sites occupied by the first Anglo-Saxon settlers would be on land which lay close

Saxon period, associated with three of the parishes in the aforementioned cluster. In AD 1016, Kinver, Clent and Tardebigge were granted to the church at Worcester, only to be seized back from the church by the Sheriff of Staffordshire. As a result, they are recorded in the Domesday survey as paying their renders to Kingswinford, which was then in Staffordshire but, in all probability, in Worcestershire prior to AD 1016²⁵—see table 1. The coincidence of these early and late links might, perhaps, represent a long-standing connection between Tardebigge and some of the territory in and around Clent Hundred.

The presence of clusters of British place names probably indicates a degree of continuity of occupation at certain sites, although it does not necessarily mean that the original British inhabitants remained at these sites. They may well have been displaced to less productive locations, yet it is clear that, overall, a significant British presence *did* remain in the region²⁶.

5. Townships: the ancient underlying boundary pattern

The settlement pattern represented by the early-named parishes of figure 2 is only the beginning of our story. Secondary settlement became established away from these locations, but even here there was probably a degree of re-occupation of earlier British sites.

Most of these farmsteads would have had a permanently cultivated infield together with outlying lands that could be ploughed when required. Other peripheral land, which often seems to have been shared between neighbouring communities, might have been used for grazing stock, and woodland would have provided fuel, swine mast and building materials. At first, many of these farmsteads probably had rather ill-defined boundaries which expanded in a piecemeal fashion to take in new land and local resources as needed. But as the density of occupation increased, the limits of adjacent settlements became more clearly defined, eventually forming a web of interlocking boundaries.

It is thought that this network of small-scale boundaries has been remarkably stable; and many of the surviving eighth-to-tenth-century charter grants seem to trace out parts of this pattern. It certainly seems to underlie the late Anglo-Saxon manorial and parish boundaries as well as the boundaries of the larger 'multiple estates' which preceded them (§6). The longevity of this underlying boundary pattern is evidenced by the frequency with which it is reflected in the boundaries of modern Civil Parishes. The bounds of the Civil Parish of Stourbridge, for example, can be traced back, with only minor changes to those of the fourteenth century inferior manor of Bedcote; and there are indications that elements of the same land unit were recognizable in AD 1290 and as far back as the mid-tenth century²⁷.

Historical geographers tend to refer to the settlements around which this network of boundaries evolved as 'townships', and the boundaries themselves as 'township boundaries'. The term is potentially confusing, however, as it does not necessarily refer to a nucleated settlement such as town or a village as we might recognise today. Often the settlements within a township consisted of dispersed farmsteads, but together these settlements would have formed a distinct community. While the term is sometimes used interchangeably with 'vill', it is more correct to think of a township as being a recognisable community and a vill as being the tract of land occupied by the township.

6. Multiple estates: royal vills and specialised outliers

As a means of organising and administering their territories, mid-Anglo-Saxon kings would grant tracts of land to favoured noblemen or to the church. These landholders would, thereby, come to own a whole cluster of vills, and large estates containing several townships became the norm by the seventh and eighth centuries. This development coincided with increasing settlement specialisation within these so-called 'multiple estates'. The nature of the specialisation would depend upon the presence of particular local resources such as woodland, fish-ponds or soils of a type suited to growing certain kinds of crop.

Numerous place names hint at this diversification of function; and many such names contain the OE element *wīc*, which often referred to a specialised farm (e.g. dairy), an industrial site or other kind of trading establishment²⁸. Local examples include Smethwick (OE *smeoþa wīc*, 'the smith's dwelling or workplace'), Bloxwich (OE *Blocc's wīc*), Aldridge (OE *alor wīc*, 'alder-tree *wīc*'—i.e. 'the farm or dwelling amongst the alders'), and West, Little and Castle Bromwich (OE *brōm wīc*, 'the *wīc* amongst broom shrubs')²⁹. Places designated as a *wīc* were often outlying settlements located away from the multiple estate's central vill. These *wīc* settlements—like others within the estate and in outlying holdings (e.g. woodland)—were subsidiary to the central vill, contributing to its upkeep by the provision of crops, materials, products and services.

The central vill (or caput), acted as the administrative heart of the multiple estate and would usually have accommodated the lord's residence together with an arable infield-outfield system. The caput itself tended to be a long-established settlement and often possessed an early (e.g. topographical) name, which was usually also applied to the estate as a whole. In many cases the caput was actually a royal vill, equipped with a palace or halls and perhaps a minster (§7).

While evidence survives of certain places, such as Willenhall, having been royal vills³⁰, it is likely that, across the country, a number of royal vills are still to be identified. However, the Domesday distribution of royal manors can provide clues. Kingswinford was a centre of royal administration at the time of the Domesday survey, and Tettenhall, Wednesbury and Willenhall were also probably in royal ownership prior to the Norman Conquest³¹. It is conceivable that Kingswinford had been the caput of a multiple estate which had also included Kinver, Tardebigge and Clent, all four places having been linked in AD 1016 and by the payment of dues to Kingswinford in the Domesday survey (§3.1 and §4). Kingswinford, Tardebigge and Clent (probably including Clent's dependencies at Broom and Rowley Regis) were held by King Edward in AD 1066 and they may well have been places of long-standing importance. There is an indication that Clent might have been the location an early minster³², although this has not been verified beyond doubt.

Royal land-holdings and the payment of customary dues are not the only clues we can use to reconstruct multiple estates. Some of the tenth-century hundreds probably developed from these large land units, and their boundaries are sometimes indicative of the extent of the multiple estate or earlier tribal region—especially where such boundaries also correspond to those of ancient ecclesiastical territories (§3.2). Where this pattern of development is seen, it is often the case that the original estate's caput became the hundred court's meeting place.

An insight into the configuration of these multiple estates can sometimes be obtained from other sources as well. Where it can be determined, the extent and distribution of woodland might tell us something about the economies of the estate's component vills; and this is particularly informative where the woodland limits coincide with known land boundaries (e.g. of a hundred, manor or parish).

Figure 3 provides a low-resolution overview of the likely pattern of wooded and cleared land in the mid-Anglo-Saxon period. It is derived from a sub-set of data first published by Dr Margaret Gelling in 1974 on the prevalence of place names containing *tūn* and *lēah*³³. In this context, Dr Gelling considers names in *tūn* to represent settlement in primarily cleared regions and *clusters* of names in *lēah* to have been coined in primarily wooded areas. The diffuse edges of the *lēah* and *tūn* regions in figure 3 reflect the fact that the presentation mode employed can only provide an approximate illustration of woodland coverage. Indeed, the figure probably exaggerates the contrast between wooded and open regions: the former would almost certainly have had numerous small clearings and glades within it, and the latter would have contained scattered pockets of woodland.

It is apparent that, in certain places, there is a high degree of correspondence between the mid-Anglo-Saxon *lēah-tūn* boundaries of figure 3 and the pattern of later parish boundaries. This might be indicative of the different economies prevalent in the estates on either side of these boundaries, or it might reflect a fundamental place-naming convention. Indeed, Dr Gelling discusses the concept of a woodland estate developing from a region of wood-pasture within a large parent estate³⁴; and she suggests that *lēah* names might have been allocated mainly to the principal woodland settlements therein, as such names are found less frequently within woodland common to multiple vills³⁵. Usage of *lēah* (or *tūn*) names on an estate-by-estate basis is consistent with the apparent correlation observed between some of the parish- and woodland-boundary lines in figure 3.

Before moving on, it is interesting to compare figures 2 and 3. With the exception of Penn, (most of) Wombourne and perhaps Rushock, the early-named parishes of figure 2 all seem to have lain within predominantly wooded regions. It would appear that early settlement here did not result in large amounts of woodland being cleared prior to the mid-Anglo-Saxon period.

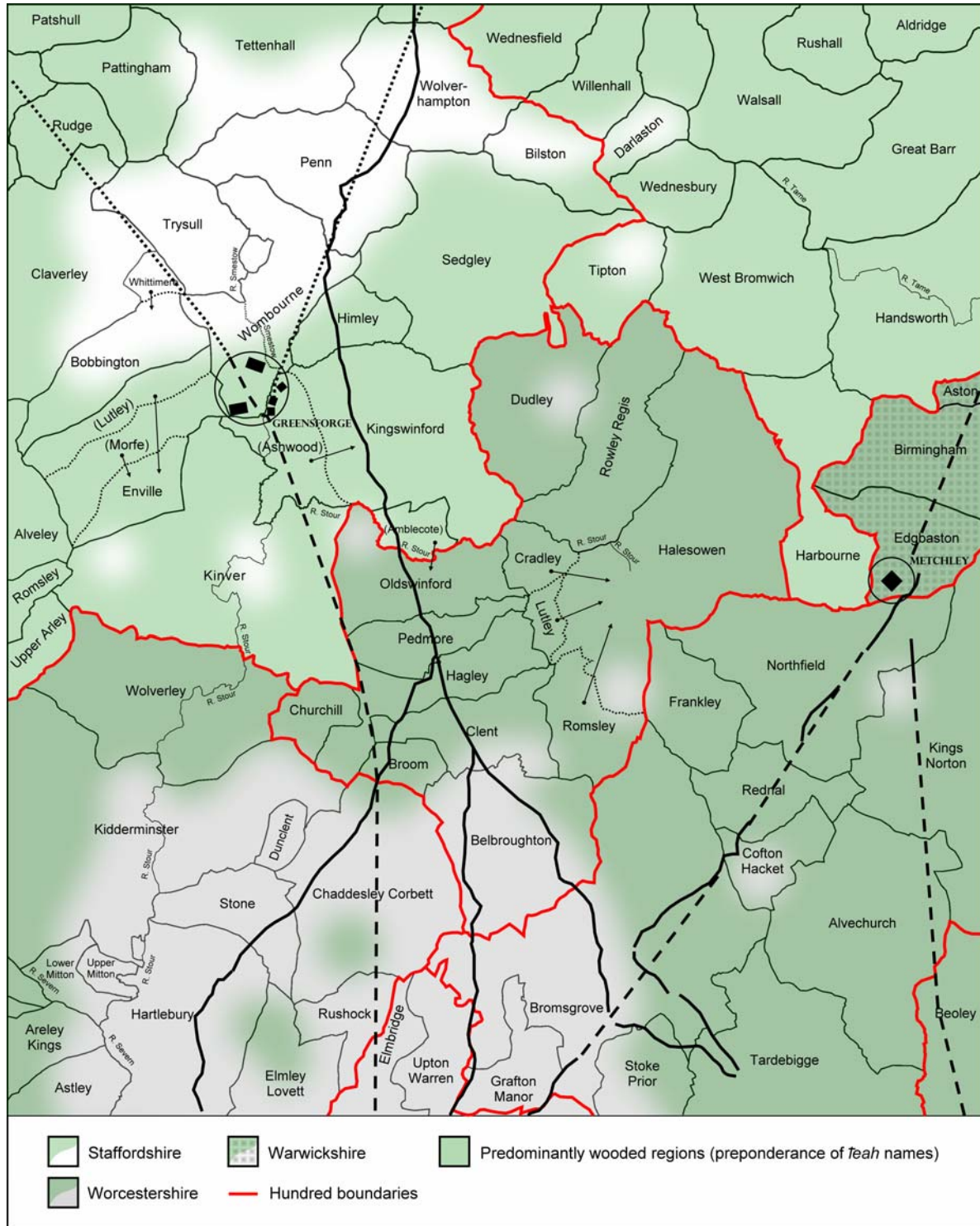


Figure 3. Approximate extent of mid-Anglo-Saxon woodland regions in the local area inferred from the distribution of place names in *lēah* and *tūn* (see text). The coincidence of the inferred woodland boundaries with some later parish boundaries (e.g. Wolverley, Clent and Churchill, and Wombourne, Penn, Wolverhampton and Bilston) is noteworthy. For other notes, see figure 1.

7. Early Anglo-Saxon minsters and their parochiae

As mentioned in §3.2, ecclesiastical divisions can be useful guides to the extent of early land units. This is particularly true of minster parochiae in that, where they can be identified, they often seem to have shared their boundaries with the ancient multiple estates from which our local manors and parishes evolved.

So how did these minsters and their parochiae originate? Large parts of Britain had been converted to Christianity during the Roman period, but much of the British church seems to have been suppressed and displaced westwards to Wales and the west of England as Anglo-Saxon paganism swept from the east in the fifth and sixth centuries. Place-name, and other, evidence suggests that the Black Country probably experienced a period of paganism, although elements of British Christianity are thought to have survived—particularly to the south-west of the region³⁶. By the end of the sixth century, missionaries of the Roman church had begun to re-introduce Christianity across Britain, with bishoprics becoming widely established by AD 737. In the west midlands, the former British Christian sites at Hereford and Worcester had, along with Lichfield, already become local episcopal seats (i.e. the central places of new dioceses) which had been established to minister, respectively, to the people of the Magonsaetan, Hwiccan and Mercian kingdoms.

The Christian church needed royal or aristocratic support—endowments of land and resources—in order to grow. For this reason, minsters were usually founded near to royal villas or other established centres of multiple estates. Indeed, there seems to have been a close association between the minsters and royal estates during the seventh and eighth centuries, as the early system of church dues bears strong similarities to royal systems of taxation³⁷.

Former Roman towns were often chosen as diocesan centres; and many of the regional minsters were also established within former Roman precincts, or other ancient enclosures, near the caputs of large estates. This probably represents a recognition, by the bishops, of the fittingness of these ancient locations for an important ecclesiastical foundation; and it may well be that there had been continued occupation of some of these sites since the Roman withdrawal in the fifth century³⁸.

A number of minsters seem to have been founded to serve specific tribal groups³⁹. This might have been the case with the *Husmerae* people and the probable minster site of Kidderminster⁴⁰ for which a grant of land by King Aethelbald of Mercia is recorded in the Ismere Diploma of AD 736⁴¹.

The early minsters were often monastic institutions, which also housed priests who travelled out to serve the surrounding community. They varied in size: some minsters were, or became, more important than others⁴², while some disappeared altogether or were assimilated into neighbouring minster parochiae as lesser churches.

During the eighth and early 9th centuries, royal land for the founding of a minster was frequently granted to selected nobles, but by about AD 830, there was an increasing tendency for Mercian kings to reclaim (by various mechanisms) some of the minster lands which had been granted from royal estates only a century or so before⁴³.

Early multiple estates and minster parochiae can sometimes be identified from records of dependent churches and chapelries, particularly records of the payment or receipt of certain dues. So-called 'pensions' paid by one or more parish churches to another, may indicate that the recipient was formerly a minster church; and 'portions' may represent an early parish priest's share of a payment that would previously have gone to the group of clergy serving a minster's parochia.

In south Staffordshire, the presence of numerous Royal Free Chapels provides evidence of former minster parochiae. From the eighth century or before, these churches had been independent of normal ecclesiastical jurisdiction, instead being controlled by, and directly answerable to, the king. Anne Jenkins has attempted to elucidate the origins of these chapels by studying records of church dues, amongst other strands of evidence⁴⁴. She concluded that the south Staffordshire region may have been an ancient Mercian heartland containing the oldest lands of the royal family, and that the Royal Free Chapels probably originated as their family churches *before* the establishment of the Diocese of Lichfield in AD 669. She also identified the churches at Tettenhall and Wolverhampton as having minster status at an early date, although Wolverhampton could have been constructed as

a lesser minster within the larger parochia of Tetterhall. Additionally, Dr Jenkins suggests that the churches at Walsall, Pattingham, Wombourne and Sedgley might have been either minsters in their own right or churches that broke free of their parent minster (probably Lichfield for the former and Tetterhall for the others) early on and then spawned dependent chapels within their own parochial fragments. All seven of these putative minster parochiae are depicted in figure 4, together with those of three other known or possible minsters in the later Worcestershire. Several of these

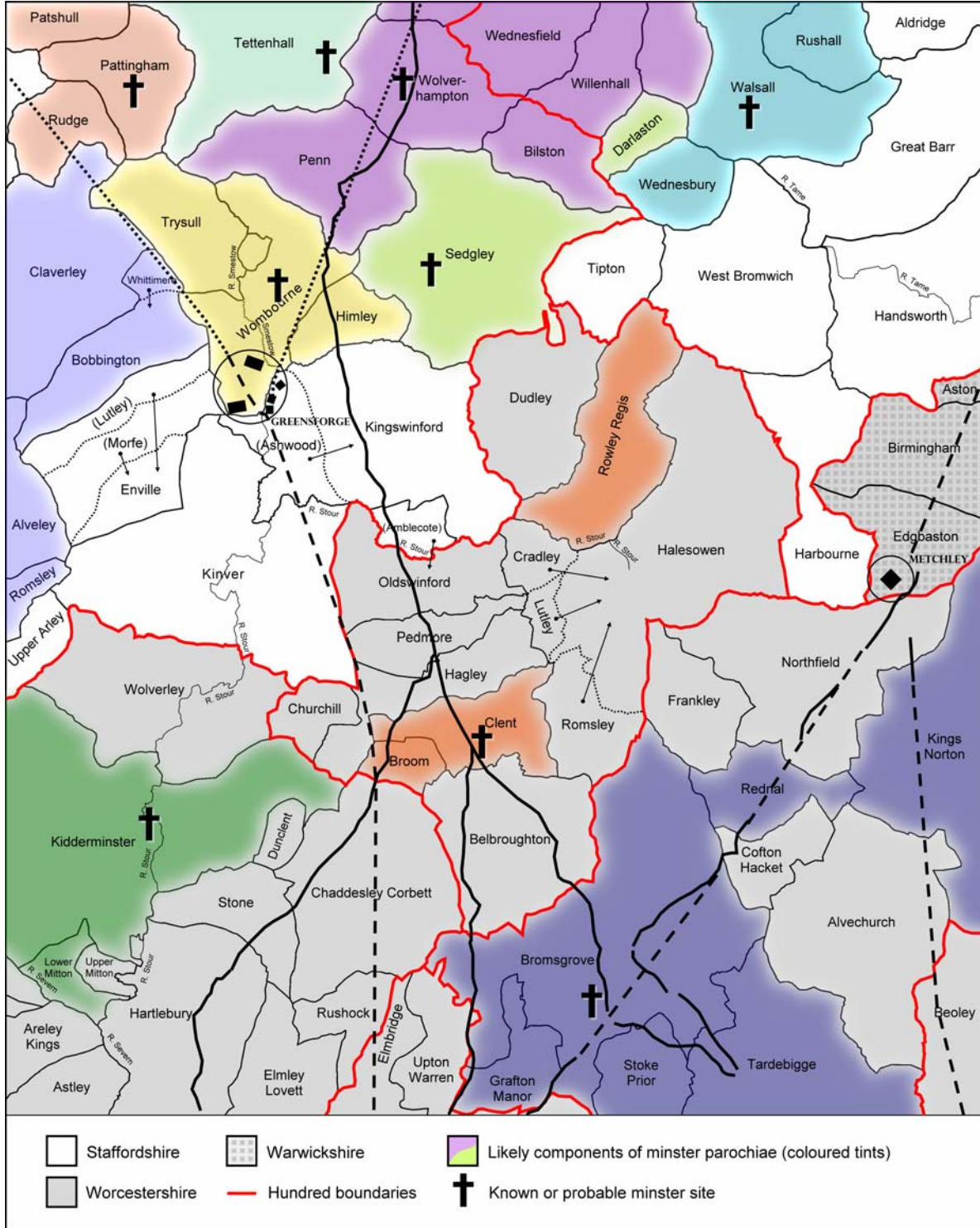


Figure 4. Local minster sites and elements of their likely parochiae superimposed upon the later pattern of Ancient Parishes of figure 1.

minsters lie close to Roman roads or the Iron Age Droitwich-to-Penkridge salt-way (now the A491); and this probably reflects the early bishops' preference to build minsters at Roman, and other ancient, sites.

It is known that a minster existed near the Roman road at Bromsgrove, on the site of the parish church of St John the Baptist, although the extent of its parochia is less certain. There are indications that it incorporated the parishes of Rednall and Kings Norton (which are recorded as Domesday berewicks of Bromsgrove) as well as Stoke Prior, Tardebigge and Bromsgrove itself; and it is conceivable that its parochia may actually have extended across most of Came Hundred.

The minster at Kidderminster probably lay at, or near, the parish church of St Mary and All Saints which overlooks the river Stour. This is a typical minster site, although no proof of a minster's existence has yet been found here despite promising evidence revealed by a Ground Penetrating Radar survey in 2006⁴⁵. Nevertheless, the Ismere Diploma⁴⁶ of AD 736, as well as the name of the town itself, point to the presence of an early minster in the region. Its parochia is unknown but one may speculate that it extended across much of Cresselau Hundred and places beyond such as Ribbesford. In the Domesday survey, Ribbesford was described as "two berewicks in Kidderminster". Kidderminster itself was referred to as a "royal manor and central place in the Stour Valley area"⁴⁷, so it was obviously of some long-standing importance even as far back as AD 1086.

A minster may also have existed at Clent. Apart from it being the caput of the Clent Hundred (and, therefore, probably the central place of the territory from which the hundred was derived), there is also some evidence of ecclesiastical connections with dependencies at Broom and Rowley Regis. It has been suggested, on this basis, that Clent may have been a minster site⁴⁸. Its entire parochia is unknown but might have encompassed the northern segment of Clent Hundred, including the (probably ancient) royal vill of Kingswinford which had been part of the same territory until the mid tenth century⁴⁹.

8. Estate fragmentation

As we have already seen, the ancient multiple estates upon which minster parochiae were based, each contained numerous separate villas, many of which contributed specialised products or services to the estate's caput. Even from a very early date, there was a need to maximise the efficiency of production in each part of the estate, and this stimulated changes, both in the organisation of the estate's constituent villas and in their agricultural processes. The introduction of large-scale open-field farming—sometimes replacing earlier infield-outfield systems⁵⁰—allowed best use to be made of the land and manpower available, permitting for example, the community to work together to plough extended areas within the limited time windows available before the growing season. It also facilitated an expansion onto heavier, less productive soils as part of a move from a more pastoral economy towards production of an arable surplus⁵¹. In some estates, these new practices went hand-in-hand with the introduction of communal rights in pasture and swine pannage. The collective nature of the new agricultural approach was reflected in the tendency for community members, who had previously been dispersed across numerous individual farmsteads, to gather into larger nucleated settlements or villages.

Open-field agriculture and the associated nucleation of settlement seem to have originated primarily on the demesne (i.e. the lord's) lands of large royal or church-owned estates⁵², only later being adopted by some of the estates' outlying villas as well. The process was gradual during the seventh to tenth centuries, the changeover taking place at different dates at different locations across the country; and some places (especially in the west of Britain, and many in the midlands) escaped these changes altogether⁵³. Where they did take place, however, they seem to have been part of a general sweeping away of old tribal customs and ways of life in favour of new systems of royal and ecclesiastical administration. Indeed, the change to more community-centred living and farming coincides with a widespread social and agricultural reorganisation that occurred across much of north-west Europe during the seventh and eighth centuries⁵⁴.

Inherent in all these changes was a trend towards the creation of small-scale economically self-sufficient units within the large multiple estates; and this inevitably led to individual villas becoming socially- and economically-viable—and independently administered—land units in their own right.

The result was, unsurprisingly, that single villis (or small groups of them) began to be inherited, leased, granted away or otherwise transferred to an increasing number of lesser landholders.

Like the change to open-field agriculture and nucleated settlement, estate fragmentation was also gradual and piecemeal, but by the ninth and tenth centuries numerous small estates, or manors, existed across much of England. These were often controlled by individual local thegns who, if their estate had not already undergone village nucleation and the transformation to open field agriculture, may have introduced such productivity-enhancing measures even at this late date—perhaps as part of a programme of estate re-planning.

Top-down planning is, however, not necessarily the only mechanism through which open-field farming, village nucleation and estate fragmentation occurred. Dr T Williamson has argued that nucleation was a product of settlement stabilisation and natural accretion of dwellings around one or two small core sites, and that the holders of the new manors (a new middle tier in society) arose primarily from "*social differentiation of the peasantry*", rather than from a small group of elite whose forebears had once controlled the large multiple estates⁵⁵.

A number of leases and grants pertaining to these new smaller estates survive for Worcestershire and south Staffordshire, including several for places in the vicinity of the Black Country⁵⁶: Wolverhampton and Trescot, Ashwood (near Kingswinford), Bilston, Willenhall, Wednesfield, Pelsall, Darlaston, Perton (in Tettenhall) and Oldswinford⁵⁷. Many of these documents contain boundary perambulations (a list of landmarks located around the perimeter of the estate); and tracing the ancient boundary landmarks on the ground can be fascinating and sometimes very productive.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that the late Anglo-Saxon charters always relate to the origins of whole manors and parishes. In fact, it is often clear that the subject of a charter is an individual township or vill, either within a contemporary land unit or within a later manor or parish. Indeed, in some charters, there are marked deviations from known medieval manor and parish boundaries, those for Bickmarsh & Ullington⁵⁸; Powick & Leigh⁵⁹, and Oldswinford⁶⁰ being just three examples in Worcestershire. Less pronounced differences are also sometimes apparent. For example, the boundary of Eswych recorded in AD 994 seems to have included a projection to the west of the river Smestow⁶¹ which no longer exists in the corresponding modern land unit of Ashwood (near Kingswinford).

While a large proportion of the late-Anglo-Saxon estate fragments developed into the manors recorded in the Domesday book, it is clear that some became mere components of Domesday manors or were moulded into their familiar manorial form via substantial boundary realignments. This seems to have happened during the late tenth or early eleventh century in the Oldswinford example mentioned above, and might have been related to a late-Anglo-Saxon programme of estate re-planning and/or nucleation⁶². That particular finding is consistent with the observation made by Dr D Hooke⁶³ that estates in wooded regions appear to have been the least stable, their boundaries often being ill-defined or subject to change. Oldswinford, and indeed much of the Black Country, seems to have been in a predominantly wooded zone (see figure 3); and Dr Hooke notes that, in many such places, estate fragmentation and boundary consolidation occurred later in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Notwithstanding such late changes, it is thought that most estate boundaries had stabilised by the eleventh century⁶⁴, becoming the manors that were to be recorded in the Domesday survey.

The distribution and hideages of Domesday manors offer insights (albeit not entirely unambiguous ones) into the "pre-fragmentation" makeup of earlier land units. It has been noted by several researchers that many of Staffordshire's manors (particularly those in Seisdon Hundred) were either assessed at five hides or, when combined with neighbouring manors, formed a land unit totalling five hides or a multiple thereof⁶⁵. Blocks of 10, 15 or 20 hides are not unknown, and it is thought that the 'five-hide' phenomenon probably derives from the fragmentation of ancient royal estates—each assessed at perhaps 50 hides or more—which produced a number of smaller units, bearing a fixed proportion (e.g. fifth or a tenth) of the original hideage assessment⁶⁶. With care, and in conjunction with other information (such as the likely minster parochiae of figure 4), the pattern of five-hide boundaries might aid in attempts to reconstruct the extent of early royal estates.

9. New churches, new parishes

The process of estate fragmentation stimulated the founding of new minsters, and by the late Anglo-Saxon period there were many lesser minsters and churches serving the smaller estate fragments. Although they had their own parochiae, they tended to be dependent upon the earlier minster centres.

Most of our parish churches were formed by a different mechanism, however. As estate fragmentation proceeded, new lay landowners tended to found their own private churches within their manors. That arrangement offered obvious advantages, permitting the local community to benefit from the services of its own resident priest. It also allowed a degree of manorial involvement in, and control of, church funding. Perhaps for these reasons as much as lordly piety, the tenth and eleventh centuries saw an explosion in private manorial church foundation. Indeed, it became somewhat of a fashion, and there were probably *many* more churches and chapels at this time than survive today as parish churches⁶⁷. In Dr John Blair's words: "...*small private churches were still rare in 900AD, whereas by AD 1000 a church was something that any prosperous ceorl aspiring to thegnhood might be expected to have*"⁶⁸. Dr Blair also points out that some of the new foundations were established in cooperation with minsters (being served by minster clergy, for example), but initially at least, many existed as entirely 'unofficial' churches within the old minster parochia.

These new churches competed, to some extent, with the minsters for financial support and for the rights to conduct baptisms and burials. Laws were introduced in the tenth and eleventh centuries to protect the rights enjoyed by the old minsters⁶⁹, but eventually some of the manorial churches were granted parochial independence. Those churches furthest from the centres of the minster estates—perhaps in marginal or wooded areas where the need for local ministration was more keenly felt—were often the first to achieve this⁷⁰. The recognition bestowed by the minsters afforded manorial churches the status of official parish church, with the right to collect tithes from the founder's estate. Many of the remaining private churches fell into disuse or became chapels dependent upon the parish church⁷¹.

As the parish churches had originated to serve local communities, their parochial boundaries tended to coincide with those of townships or manors. Because of tenth-century tithe laws and thirteenth-century church reforms (amongst other things), parish boundaries became less susceptible to change and most of them survived until they could be accurately mapped in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This, of course, provides us with a very useful indication of the geographical extent of late Anglo-Saxon manorial landholdings. It should be remembered, however, that there was not always a one-to-one correspondence between parish and manor. In some cases, a parish would extend across two or more manors (perhaps encompassing a number of townships), or it might occupy only a fraction of a larger manor. This, in itself, gives us some idea of the relative distributions of population and wealth-producing land, as each parish would have had to generate sufficient income to pay the tithes due to its church. Most parish boundaries were well established (and stable) by the time of the Domesday survey, although the process of parish formation was often delayed in remote locations, with some parish boundaries in woodland regions not being fully demarcated until the twelfth century⁷².

The change to this new parochial system did not cause the minsters to disappear, however. They remained throughout the early Norman period, as identifiably superior ecclesiastical entities—mother churches—exerting a strong and lasting influence over the developing system of parish churches. Indeed some of the old minsters, such as that of St Mary at *Heantune* (now St Peter at Wolverhampton), were re-endowed and rebuilt in the late Anglo-Saxon period⁷³.

Because of their relative importance, minster estates (i.e. the capita of those former multiple estates which had accommodated minsters) tended to retain their integrity for longer and were more resistant to fragmentation⁷⁴. Indeed, it is clear from figure 4 that the parishes of Bromsgrove, Tettenhall and Kidderminster, which developed from such estates, remained somewhat larger than their neighbours right up until the boundary reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

10. Epilogue

I hope this brief overview has made for an interesting introduction to the ancient land units which ultimately evolved into our network of local parishes. We have seen that the parish boundary pattern echoes post-Roman settlement distributions and Anglo-Saxon land use as well as more than 1500 years' of ecclesiastical foundation and secular administration. So next time you encounter an Ancient Parish in the course of researching local or family history, remember not just what the parish represented to the last few generations, but also the complex sequence of cultural, social, religious and landscape transformations embodied in its very long history.

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