

Hook Norton, *regia villa*

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SUMMARY

The ridge on which stands the iron-age hillfort Tadmarton Camp is tentatively identified as the site of an Anglo-Saxon royal vill and the scene of a battle in 913. Nearby was the original glebeland of Hook Norton parish church, suggesting that the early ecclesiastical centre may also have been on the ridge, not in the village 2½ miles away.

For the year 913, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records one of the abortive Viking counter-attacks which punctuated the re-conquest of the Danelaw:¹

In this year the army from Northampton and Leicester rode out after Easter and broke the peace, and killed many men at Hook Norton and round about there. And then very soon after that, as the one force came home, they met another raiding band which rode out against Luton. And then the people of the district became aware of it and fought against them and reduced them to full flight . . .

The 12th-century Latin writer John of Worcester, who used texts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which are no longer extant, is slightly more helpful:²

After Easter the pagan army from Northampton and Leicester plundered Oxfordshire, and killed many men in the royal vill Hook Norton and in many other places (*in Oxenofordensi provincia praedam egerunt, et in regia villa Hokernetune et in multis aliis villis quam plures occiderunt*) . . .

It was a standard practice of pre-Conquest writers (and one which respected administrative and political realities) to locate military campaigns by reference to royal villae.³ The villa mentioned in the 913 annal has, however, disappeared from recorded memory. This note will argue from indirect evidence that there was indeed a focal point of strategic importance, and perhaps also hierarchical and religious importance, near Hook Norton; but that it lay not in the modern village, but on the ridge of high ground some 2½ miles to the north-east (Fig. 1).

Although the 913 episode is presented as a mere raid, the converging of two large

¹ D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents I: c. 500-1042* (2nd edn., 1979), 212 (misdated to 916 by the A text, and to 914 by the C and D texts).

² *Florentii Wigorniensis Monachi Chronicon ex Chronicis*, ed. B. Thorpe, i (1848), 122. On 'Florence's' (i.e. John's) use of the Chronicle see Whitelock op.cit. note 1, 120, and A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307* (1974), 145.

³ See P.H. Sawyer, 'The Royal *Tūn* in Pre-Conquest England', in P. Wormald (ed.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (1983), 283-4.

hosts suggests some more organized purpose. The men from Leicester and Northampton would probably have met at Banbury; if they then approached Hook Norton, they must have done so along the ridgeway which runs south-westwards from Banbury towards Warwickshire and Gloucestershire. At the point where Hook Norton parish meets Swalcliffe, Tadmarton, Milcombe and Wigginton, this track bisects the Iron-Age hillfort called Tadmarton Camp (SP 388 357), and passes near two smaller, polygonal enclosures.⁴

Is it possible that these camps were held against the Danes? Certainly they seem a more likely scene for the battle than anywhere nearer Hook Norton village. The re-use of prehistoric earthworks, commonplace in Dark-Age warfare, was still nothing unusual in the 10th century: Edward the Elder had done it with Badbury Rings in 900.⁵ In the circumstances of the time the strategic value of the Tadmarton site may have been considerable. It stood on the highest ground for miles to the north and east, and commanded an obvious route by which enemies from the Danelaw might traverse the Cotswolds and attack the southern Mercian towns along the Fosse Way. Perhaps the 913 army was trying to do exactly this, and was driven back to plunder Oxfordshire by a successful defence of the Hook Norton ridge.

The hillfort lies just outside Hook Norton parish, but it seems likely that the name once denoted a larger area. The convergence of five parishes on the hillfort, in a formation like segments of a circle, suggests the subdivision of some earlier whole. The name, which probably means 'the *tūn* of the people at Hocca's hill-slope (*ōra*)',⁶ could well refer to the ridge on which the hillfort stands. It is a reasonable conjecture that 'Hook Norton' originally meant the whole territory, later divided into five parishes, of which this ridge is the central eminence.

It now becomes easier to understand how Hook Norton was royal land in 913 but not in 1066. One of the other segments, Milcombe, was a chapelry of Bloxham and part of the Bloxham/Adderbury manorial group, almost certainly royal before the Conquest.⁷ Tadmarton itself was given by King Eadwig to two thegns and then to Abingdon Abbey, all within 956.⁸ It looks very much as though a royal territory around the Hook Norton ridge was broken up into manors during the 10th century.⁹

If this hypothesis is valid, there once existed a large block of royal land running continuously between Warwickshire and Northamptonshire; the western half (Hook

⁴ It seems likely that the original road followed the parish boundary, and has been diverted slightly across Wigginton Heath. For Tadmarton Camp see *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 316.

⁵ Whitelock *op.cit.* note 1, 207.

⁶ M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, ii (E.P.N.S. xxxiv, 1954), 354, which also mentions a field-name *Hokernes*, i.e. 'Hocca's promontory (*ness*)'.

⁷ See *V.C.H. Oxon.* ix, 53-5, 58-9. Just before the Conquest Bloxham had been held successively by Earl Tostig and Earl Edwin, but its status as head of the hundred suggests that it had been royal demesne not long previously. Its member, Adderbury, was bequeathed to the Bishop of Winchester by the atheling Athelstan, who had bought it from his father the king, in 1015 (P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* (1968) (cited hereafter as 'S'), No. 1503). For Bloxham, Adderbury and their members as an early royal estate, see also M.J. Franklin, 'Minsters and Parishes: Northamptonshire Studies' (Unpublished Cambridge D.Phil., 1982), 330-3.

⁸ S.611, 617, 618, 584. Cf. M. Gelling, *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (1979), 129-31.

⁹ For this type of patronage see P. Stafford, 'The Reign of Æthelred II: a Study in the Limitations on Royal Policy and Action', in D. Hill (ed.), *Æthelred the Unready* (B.A.R. 59, 1978), 15-46, esp. p. 26. A parallel for what may have happened at Hook Norton is King Edgar's alienation of Ducklington, Shifford and Witney with its members, all apparently from the Bampton royal estate (S. 678, 911, 771). However, work in progress by Dr. Simon Keynes, to whom I am very grateful for a draft of his paper, suggests that the unprecedented number of grants in 956 reflect a transference of land from one aristocratic group to another, not a sudden massive alienation of royal demesne.

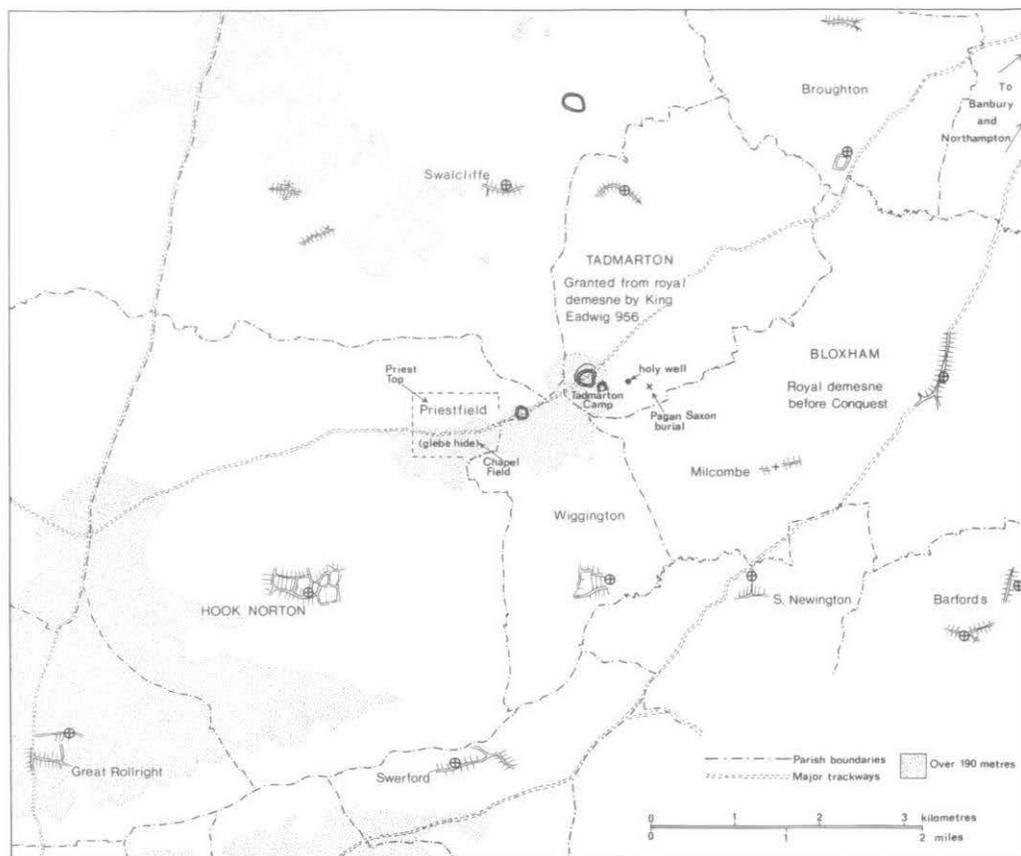


Fig. 1. Medieval Hook Norton and its environs. A cross in a circle represents a parish church.

Norton, Wiggington, Tadmarton, Swalcliffe, Shutford, Epwell and the Sibfords) fragmented in the 10th century, leaving the eastern half (Bloxham, Milcombe, Milton, the Barfords, Adderbury and Bodicote) rather more intact. By the 11th century the secular centre of the eastern half was Bloxham, and its ecclesiastical centre Adderbury.¹⁰ There is no reason, however, why the western half should not have contained a centre of its own, or even the original centre which was abandoned when the territory shrank.

Villa regia should obviously mean more than an old hillfort: unless John of Worcester was using it very loosely, it implies a royal hall with satellite buildings, and possibly an important church.¹¹ The site is not *prima facie* an unlikely one and deserves further scrutiny, but at present there are only the most tenuous of archaeological hints: a 'holy well' (so called by 1346)¹² and a presumably Anglo-Saxon burial with a spear,¹³ both a

¹⁰ *V.C.H. Oxon.* ix, 1, 30.

¹¹ For the normal characteristics of *villae* see Sawyer *op.cit.* note 3.

¹² Gelling *op.cit.* note 6, ii, 406 (*Halywelle* as a personal name).

¹³ The note "human remains and spearhead found" appears on O.S. 25th 1st edn. Oxfordshire sheet IX.6 (1881) at the point indicated on Fig. 1. No other details are known.

little way east of the hillfort. There remains, however, one other pointer to the focus of pre-Conquest Hook Norton: the fact that the original block of glebe-land lay not near the Norman parish church in the village, but on the ridge to the west of the hillfort.

In 1086 Robert d'Oilly I held Hook Norton, by far the biggest of his Oxfordshire manors.¹⁴ When Robert d'Oilly II founded Oseney Abbey in 1129 he endowed it with all his demesne churches, Hook Norton included.¹⁵ In 1153-4, his son Henry confirmed 'in Hook Norton . . . the land called Prestefeld which once pertained to the church of that vill . . ., and two hides of land in that manor which the said church [i.e. Oseney] once had by grant of my father'.¹⁶ Soon afterwards the land is described as 'one hide of villeinage, and Prestefeld, and Buterhul, for three hides',¹⁷ and the compiler of the Oseney Cartulary noted that the Abbey held 'Hook Norton church and one hide of land with appurtenances of the church's dower'.¹⁸ So before 1129, an enclosed hide called Priestfield had belonged to Hook Norton church. This was decidedly more than ordinary manorial glebes of the time, if less than the normal endowments of collegiate minsters.¹⁹ It would at least be consistent with the status of such a church as might have accompanied a small royal vill.

Priestfield remained intact for several centuries. The Abbey was receiving £6 13s 4d from the farm of a close called 'Prestfelde' with 20s for its tithe in 1509/10, and leased the tithes of 'oure pasture or crosse called Prestyslesne' in 1521.²⁰ As late as 1782 it was leased as 'Priestfield Pasture'.²¹ Unfortunately the field-pattern was reorganised soon afterwards, and the boundaries of Priestfield cannot be recognised on the earliest maps (1773 and 1808).²² Its approximate position (Fig. 1) can, however, be recovered from two pieces of evidence. First, a deed of 1182-5 refers to 20 acres 'in the end of Prestesfeld next Wydecumbe',²³ which must have adjoined the northern part of the east parish boundary near Withycombe Farm (SP 377 347). Secondly, a field north of Nill Farm is labelled 'Priest Top' on the 1808 map. If the 20 acres and Priest Top were respectively in the south-east and north-west corners of Priestfield we have a tract of some 100-150 acres, which would be consistent with a one-hide assessment. Thus the original glebe-land evidently lay on the north-western slope of the ridge, bisected by the same trackway which runs through Tadmarton Camp.

Another small field within this block appears on the 1773 map as 'Chapel Field' (SP 375 349). Such names are often clues to lost churches or chapels, and it is tempting to wonder whether the first church at Hook Norton may have stood within the bounds of Priestfield. The suggestion that the parish church was transferred from here to its present site, 2 miles away in the village, may seem a bold one. Yet such migrations are known, especially from the sites of early and important churches left isolated by settlement changes. In c. 1150, William Mauduit was allowed 'to remove his church of

¹⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 413.

¹⁵ *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 90.

¹⁶ *Oseney Cartulary*, ed. H.E. Salter, iv (O.H.S. xcvi, 1934), 256: 'in Hokenerton manerio meo, terram que dicitur Prestefeld, que olim ad ecclesiam eiusdem ville pertinuit . . .; et duas hydas terre in eodem manerio quas prefata ecclesia aliquando habuit ex concessu patris mei.'

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29: 'in Hokenartona unam hidam de vilenagio, et Prestefeld, et Buterhul, pro tribus hidis.'

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 256: 'ecclesiam de Hokenartona et unam hydam terre cum pertinentiis de dote ecclesie.'

¹⁹ See J. Blair, 'Secular Minster Churches in Domesday Book', in P.H. Sawyer (ed.), *Domesday Book: a Reassessment* (1985), 105-13.

²⁰ *Oseney Cartulary*, vi, 231; iv, 290-1.

²¹ O.R.O., MS Oxon. Dioc. Pap. C. 2116 No. 4.

²² O.R.O. Stilgoe A25; Bodl. (R)MS.Dep.C17:49(160).

²³ *Oseney Cartulary* iv, 258: 'xxxi acras que sunt in fine de Prestesfeld iuxta Wydecumbe'.

Hanslope [Bucks.] and site it for the convenience of the parish (*in aisia parochie*).²⁴ At Godalming (Surrey) the hierarchy between an Anglo-Saxon minster on a remote site and its daughter church in the main settlement was reversed during the 12th century, the former being reduced to an unfrequented chapel which soon vanished completely.²⁵ It must have been a matter of local circumstances whether an upland mother-church remained standing in isolation from the villages which had grown up in the valleys around it,²⁶ or whether it yielded to the new pattern. At Hook Norton the move must have happened, if it happened at all, by not long after the Conquest, since the nave of the present church is 11th-century.²⁷

We are left with at least a tenable hypothesis that the ridge to the west and east of Tadmarton Camp was an Anglo-Saxon 'central place', pre-dating Hook Norton village and to an extent superseded by it. Recent work (notably Christopher Taylor's)²⁸ has shown how radically the geography of settlement changed during the late-Saxon and Norman centuries. Many ancient foci of local society had little place in the new landscape of villages. Some survived because of their tenurial or legal importance; the Hook Norton ridge may be typical of many others which vanished leaving only tenuous traces.

²⁴ *The Beauchamp Cartulary*, ed. E. Mason (Pipe Roll Soc. n.s. xliii, 1971-3), 100.

²⁵ See W.J. Blair, 'Landholding, Church and Settlement in Surrey before 1300' (unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1982), 220-1.

²⁶ Cf. especially the Worcestershire minster of Hanbury, which actually stands within the ramparts of a hillfort: D. Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon Landscapes of the West Midlands* (B.A.R. xcv, 1981), 63.

²⁷ Long-and-short quoins on the NE. and SE. external angles of the nave were exposed in January 1987 (observation by R.A. Chambers).

²⁸ Now synthesised in *Village and Farmstead* (1983).