

Saxon East Meon

From 'A History of East Meon'.

Freddie Standfield's 'A History of East Meon', 8 - 14, carries detailed account of Saxon East Meon.

He speculates that the Jutes, known in the Meon Valley as the Meonwara, came as far up the river as Sheep (Ship?) Bridge near West Meon but not as far as East Meon.

In 790, King Beotric of the West Saxons granted late in Hissaburn (Hurstbourne) to Prince Hemele in exchange for land on the River Meones, which he had bought from King Kinewulf. Thereafter, Viking raids ... increased until involving fleets of a hundred or more vessels... They burned and destroyed everywhere, especially churches, monasteries and convents... A national leader was desperately needed and emerged in 871 in the person of Alfred Winchester emerged as a centre of the Kingdom of Wessex ... policy was to create a country in which people of many races could live in peace, harmony and common allegiance ... restored education, justice and religion. When the great king died in 899 he willed land that included East Meon to his younger son ... Though his successors, Edward the Elder and Athelstan, were also great kings, they were too occupied resisting fresh Danish invasions ... to be educationalists.... Edward became overlord of the North and completed the minster at Winchester ...

Dr G.B. Grundy translated and interpreted five royal charters of the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries affecting East Meon Hundred, though even he described their elucidation as the most formidable tasks in the counties of Hants, Berks and Wilts. He explained that modern parish boundaries are very ancient, each representing a single land unit of early times ... Grundy added that regions of early settlement are those in which arable agriculture could be started with least difficulty... ... individuals and families seem either to have cleared parts of the forest, or to have settled in isolated open spaces, thereby creating secular units too small to be adopted as ecclesiastical parishes.

Accordingly, these smaller units were combined with others for church purposes, though each retained its former identity as a 'tithing'. The land comprised in the 'Meon Charters' falls within this category....

The earliest of the charters, reputedly dated 824, records a grant of 22 hides, by Egbert, King of the West Saxons, to the prefect Wulfgeard, of land 'Aet Meone'. It includes the whole of the parish of Froxfield except the tiding of Oakshott, and the tithings of Peak and Westbury (and possibly Bereleigh), but it is 'the most difficult of the Meon charters'.

The next charter, granted to his thegn, Eadric, by King Eadwigh (or Edwy) whose short reign lasted only from 956 - 958 ... the land comprised 50 hides and included Steep, Langrish, Oakshott tithing in Froxfield, and Oxenbourne tithing in East Meon, all of which was collectively labelled 'Meone'. ... a perambulation of the estate's bounds would exceed 20 miles.

Standfield then follows the boundary lines, defined by tracks, streams, hills, fords and even flimsy buildings and individual trees....

The next charter, probably dated about 960 and also entitled 'Aet Meone', comprised even more land than the last, 65 hides, and was granted by King Edgar (reigned 959 – 975) to his grandmother Queen Eadgifu (Edith), replacing a charter she gave him for safe keeping and which he lost. The estate comprised the whole of Froxfield, Steep and Langrish, part of Privett and the tithings of Coombe, Riplington, Bereleigh and Church in East Meon, estimated by Grundy to exceed 19,000 acres.

Then follows, again, a detailed description of the features which comprise the border.

In 967, King Edgar made another grant of eight hides 'aet Meone and to Fearnfields' to the noble matron Winflod. The land included Westbury tithing, sout of the Meon, whilst north of the river, Peak and Privett seem to be included, though the bounds are uncertain. The name 'Fearnfields', meaning 'fern moorland', survives in that of Farnfield Farm, east of Privett Church.

The first specific reference to East Meon (as distinct from 'Meone', which included part or all of East Meon) is found when Alwyn, Bishop of Winchester from 1032 – 1047, granted East and West Meon 'to the monks of Winchester', retaining the management in his own hands, thereby in effect allocating the income for their benefit. The bishop, or his predecessors, had apparently acquired 'ownership' of the two Meons by charters, perhaps a whole series, presumably after the estates had reverted to the Crown.

I propose briefly to refer to an earthwork and a church, unconnected, except that each is relevant to pre-Conquest East Meon. The earthwork, running east and west, extends with breaks for a mile in West Meon parish and continues for half a mile in East Meon parish

East Meon's Norman church, All Saints, was built between 1075 and 1150, but was it preceded by a Saxon church? No physical trace is known of such an earlier church, either beneath the site of the Norman church or elsewhere..... there can be little doubt that Wilfred preached at all the valley's population centres, up to and including West Meon and possibly beyond, and would certainly have built at least temporary mud and wattle churches in the villages.

It is unbelievable that East Meon would have been without a church for over 400 years – from Wilfred's time until after the Conquest. Supposition can be carried further. First, by a charter dated 963, King Edgar granted the manor of Ambersham, comprising eight hides, to the 'Church of Andrew the Apostle at Meon'. As kings did not give whole manors to 'field churches', St Andrew's church must have been an important one in the 10th century. It is therefore probable that this was East Meon's Saxon church.

Finally, the Domesday Survey of 1086 does record that Bishop Walkelin was then holding in East Meon six hides and one virgate *with the church* and the mill, which is surely conclusive as to the existence of an earlier church.

