

Wessex in the Early Middle Ages

Digest of the book by Barbara Yorke

Introduction

I took these notes (jottings, really) whilst reading this book, which had been recommended to me by Nick Stoodley as a good introduction to the history of the Saxons in the Meon Valley. I have mainly noted the passages which are relevant to the Meon Valley.

General

Until the 9th century, Wessex was not a national region.

Until now, the literary sources have led the way for archaeological research.

In 410, Britain ceased to be part of the Roman Empire. Town life declined, villas were abandoned, Germanic burial grounds start to appear. (BY debates whether the Meonstoke villa was British or German.)

Post-Roman traces in eastern Hants, Froxfield entrenchment, Germanic settlement in Portchester Castle. ('Port' was probably derived from the name of a king, hence Portsea, Portsmouth &c.)

Anglo Saxon Chronicle's account of 5th and 6th centuries is unreliable. Saxon settlers were not literate until Christianity brought literacy.

Creation of Wessex 600 - 802

The Isle of Wight was an independent kingdom, founded according to the Chronicle by Stuf and Wihtgar. The Solent was also described as a Jutish kingdom.

There were connections between the Jutes of the IoW and the Meon Valley and the Jutes of Kent. (See last chapter, Alton jewel.)

Now missing, in a valley near East Meon was a settlement named 'Ytedene', 'valley of the Jutes'.

Wulfhere of Mercia handed the 'Jutish province' of Meonwara (people of the Meon) to King Aethelwath of the South Saxons.

Wessex was created by the conquests of the Royal House of Gewisse in the 6th and 7th centuries, starting in the Upper Thames Valley. A new Gewissan bishopric was established at Winchester, with the aim of conquering the Jutes in south Hampshire.

Caedwalla of the Gewisse (685 - 8) achieved permanent control of both Jutish provinces (IoW and South Hants)

Growth of Hamwic (today's Southampton) in early 8th century demonstrates ability of West Saxon kings to move their subjects - see last chapter.

Minster parishes e.g. Farnham formed c800 from multiple hides. 'Hundreds' were formed in early 10th century. 'Royal Villas' were run by reeves; kings visited. 'Sub-kings' were created to expedite administration, known as earldomen.

By now, Wessex was one of four major kingdoms in Anglo-Saxon England. King Ine was a notably responsible statesman. He removed 'sub-kings' and created shires

Wessex and England, 802 – 1066

In 856, Aethalbald resisted return of father Aethelwulf from Rome – revolt in West Wessex. (Resentment of patronage shown to Winchester by Bishop Swithun.) Wessex is divided west/east. Greatest preponderance of royal estates (demesne land) was in West Wessex; kings spent more time there.

The Chronicle is likely to have been commissioned by Alfred, to whom it is very complimentary. Asser, the author, was patronised by Alfred.

Viking invasions. 870 Vikings attacked Wessex from Ireland and France. 'Great heathen army' lands at Thanet 871. Alfred on the run, but defeats Guthrum at Edington.

Building of 'burhs' – fortified towns. No part of Wessex was more than 20 miles from a burh. Winchester street pattern still follows the grid created under Alfred. One in five adult men were members of a garrison.

'Hundreds' first mentioned in 'Hundred Ordinance' of 945/961. Hundred courts to be held every four weeks. Hundreds evolved from earlier administrative units, groupings of estates. (Probably not 'hundred hide' units, as some have argued.) Hundreds divided into tithings – 1/10th, or 10 hides .

'Shipsokes' introduced by King Edgar, to finance building of ships (strain on relations between kings and noblemen).

Viking attacks, which often ended in agreement to pay tribute, resulted in yet more taxation demands. 980 and 982 attacks on Southampton and Portchester. 993/4, Norwegians (Olaf Trygvasson) and Danes invaded eastern Wessex; ealdormen Aethelweard and Aelfric agreed to pay tribute. Vikings wintered in Southampton, then used IoW as base (which continued for many years).

Eastern Wessex sided with Cnut, who subsequently became king of all England. He kept the structures of shire/hundred/tything. Greatest concentration of Dane s settlers was in Winchester. Cnut appoints Goodwine, father of Harold, as Earl of Essex. Subsequently Edward attempted to reduce power of earls. (He spent much of his time in London – where he dedicated Westminster Abbey.)

The spread of Christianity 400 - 800

Although British Church had origins in the Roman period, monasticism spread from mainland Europe.

Old Minster, the second West Saxon cathedral (after Dorchester) was built on site of the Roman forum c660. Bishopricks based in Roman towns. (Relics of

Germanic gods' names (Woden, Thor) in place names including Wheely Down, from lea + weoh (temple).

Birinus, first West Saxon bishop, was consecrated in Rome and sent to convert Gewisse's heathens. He died in 649/50 and Wine became bishop of Winchester, at the time the sole West Saxon bishopric.

665s, Caedwalla comes 'under the spell' of Northumbrian Wilfrid, who became bishop of the South Saxons. Caedwalla converted to Christianity in 688, and died. Last pagan king. Shortage of priests – Wilfrid appointed just two to convert IoW.

Two cemeteries in Winnall, late sixth or early seventh centuries. First, pagan, second, christian.

Kings found that becoming Christians helped in taking over churches ...

Renewal and redirection 800 – 1066

Bishops of Winchester extended their ownership of minsters, to the detriment of monasteries. Conflict with kings' ownership of minsters, e.g. Portchester. Parochiae of minster churches corresponded with territories administered from a villa regalis.

Minster churches were major establishments taken over by West Saxon. 'Collegiate' or 'mother' churches, below the level of bishoprics. (A map on p 183, taken from *Minsters and Parish Churches*, ed J.Blair, has three minster churches in our area, Titchfield, Bishop's Waltham and East Meon.)

Decline in ninth century resulted in a variety of clerical regimes, including married clerics ("lascivii").

Nunneries often established to house ladies of royal household. (*Not in the book, but a Charter dated around 970 was made by King Edgar and witnessed by Aethelwold, Bishop of Winchester, granting 'that famous place which the locals have always called Aet Meon' to the Dowager Queen Mother, Eadgifu, in recognition of her desire to retire to the religious life*).

BY refers to "Eadred (946 - 55) and his mother Eadgifu, who seems to have been an influential supporter of monasticism". Eadred's brother Edgar appointed Aethelwold as Bishop of Winchester.

Aethelwold brought saints' relics to Winchester and was responsible for cult of St Swithun, including the building of a shrine to him. (Accounts exist describing decoration of Old Minster and other churches, which do not survive.) He also established a school at Old Minster, whose star pupils were Wulfstan and Aelfric.

Minor nobles could establish churches (whose administrative areas were not monastery or parish boundaries, but hundreds.) Lords could appoint their own clergy.

Most churches were wooden, until late Saxon, when one- and two-cell stone churches began to appear. Stone crosses were focal points for devotion, e.g. at Bishop's Waltham.

Stigand, in 1066, was archbishop of both Canterbury and Winchester, only example of 'pluralism'.

Social structure and rural life

Domesday book sets out, in effect, a record of Saxon Society.

Four main classes – noble, geneat, ceorl and slave. Status was reflected in the wergeld payments if they were killed – 1,200, 600 or 200 shillings respectively.

Peasants were categorised as villanus, bordarius, (dependent peasants), gebur (superior, also 'geneat'), colibertus (freed slave), and of course slaves. Villanii and bordarii has specified obligations of service and payments to their lord.

Slaves (walh) were those taken captive in wars and battles, or those in rent arrears. The majority were Britons. By the end of the Saxon period, slaves had been replaced by dependent peasantry.

Barry Cunliffe studied topography of Catherington, Chalton, Church Down and Clanfield. Discerning early Anglo Saxon movement from valley slopes to riversides, and from scattered units to clusters, farms to villages. Chalton was an example of a mixed economy – spinning, smithing, bronze-casting.

Several powerful women in royal households; Eadgifu was an important influence over her sons Edmund and Eadred.

Early weapons demonstrated clear divisions of ethnicity (Saxons, Britons), but by 7th century the distinctions fade.

The right families had access to court, and became knights and thegns. Disasters, man-made or natural, led to social mobility; ceorls became thegns, gebures bought their way out of their obligations.

The famous Alton belt buckle (in Alton Museum) was made in Kent, its owner under Kentish overlordship. (Common Jutish origin.)

Desire for trade was a motive for the conquest of Jutish provinces in East Hants and the IoW. Hamwic (Southampton) was important because of its access to France. Population grew to 2,000 or 3,000. (Wic = trading place.) It was a planned settlement. The decline of Hamwic coincided with the growth of Winchester (a fortified burh, whereas Hamwic was vulnerable to Viking raids).

Important towns were mints; Winchester by far the biggest in Wessex.