

The burh of Wallingford and its context in Wessex

by Jeremy Haslam

While it is clear that there was much that was happening in and around Wallingford in the long period before the creation of the burh in the late ninth century, it is this particular event which created Wallingford as a significant place in ways which more than any single episode in its history have determined its subsequent historical development, as well as its topography and physical layout. To appreciate the significance of this event it is necessary to view the early development of the burh at Wallingford in the pre-Conquest period in its wider political, strategic and landscape context as part of similar and parallel developments in the late Saxon kingdom of Wessex (and indeed further afield). It is therefore important to ask how its creation as a burh or defended settlement was (or was not) conceived as forming one element in a system of burhs which was built over the whole of Wessex by King Alfred, and which is listed in the Burghal Hidage document¹.

There are many reasons for holding that the 31 burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage constituted a *system* in its fullest sense. One of the most telling of these is that the burghal territories of these burhs - the areas assigned to them for their upkeep - form a spatial jigsaw whose individual elements interlock with each other within the shires or their precursors. This concept has however, recently been questioned in a recent paper (Baker and Brooks 2011), though on grounds which are in my view ultimately unsustainable. I have developed a historical model elsewhere to the effect that the building of this system of burhs was initiated by King Alfred during a particular window of both political and strategic opportunity in the years 878-9, after he had defeated the Viking army under Guthrum at the battle of Edington in northern Wiltshire in early 878 (Haslam 2005; Haslam 2011).

As one element in this system, as will be shown, Wallingford was intimately connected with the two burhs to the north of the Thames (Oxford and Buckingham), as well as Sashes to its east, in both their spatial and functional aspects. The functional connectivity between all neighbouring burhs is a factor which sheds considerable light on the broader historical narrative of Alfred's confrontation with the invading Vikings, as well as on wider issues. Important amongst these is the way that burghal territories and ultimately shires developed as military and political units of administration. They also relate to questions such as the degree to which, and the means by which, Alfred and his successors were able to exert control over territories and populations and to mould the late Anglo-Saxon state.

The concept of a system of burhs in Wessex, of which the burh at Wallingford was one element, has many ramifications. One defining characteristic of at least the larger burhs of the

Burghal Hidage system is that they were garrisoned by a resident population, which complemented the operations of the *fyrð*, a new standing army instituted by King Alfred. The garrisons and the *fyrð* worked in tandem in ways which provided an effective counter to the mobility of Viking armies who could range at will over the countryside. The burhs also guarded strategically sensitive points or areas, such as the crossing points of rivers or important routeways (many of them at that time Roman roads in continuous use in later centuries), or important royal centres, or access points to Viking warships up rivers or estuaries (often in physical and functional association with bridges), in ways which were supported by the contingents from neighbouring burhs in the system when required. These aspects are often described as forming a systematic 'defence in depth'. The burhs also provided defended enclosures suitable for the storage of agricultural surpluses or provisions for the *fyrð* and the garrisons, whether in the form of livestock, horses or arable products, which from earlier ages had formed an aspect of renders from all estates due to the king. There are strong suggestions that the systematic provision of secure marketing places for local and regional trade and exchange must also have been built into the functionality of burhs from the beginning. Their greater security under royal protection (the 'king's peace') also meant that the burhs provided the most suitable places for the minting of coins under royal control. All of these aspects are discussed in greater detail by Richard Abels (Abels 1988, 58-78).

However, perhaps of greater importance than these local functions, whether social, economic or military in origin, was the overarching function of the burghal system of Wessex as a means of royal control. In my view, this political function has hardly been recognised, and has certainly not been given its due weight. This is discussed in more detail below. The existence or importance of a burh at a particular point is often predicated on its strategic function alone (for instance in the discussion of Baker and Brookes), rather than as an essential element within a system in which all the elements were interconnected. To assume that these strategic reasons were the principle determining factors in the siting of the burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage would, however, be to miss the point of the existence of the system as a whole.

As suggested above, a key to the understanding of the ways in which the aspects of this interconnectedness functioned on the ground lies in the importance which can be attached to the concept of the burghal territory. As is clear from accounts in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the early tenth century, the control of both western Mercia, and the 'conquest' of the areas of the Danelaw under Viking control in eastern Mercia, were effected by the building of burhs at key sites by Aethelflaed and King Edward the Elder, in a staged progression from south to north over a number of years. These burhs functioned as the agents of royal control of sometimes hostile areas by means of the enforcement of the submission of the populations within a burghal territory to the king, which was in all cases ratified by an oath of allegiance. This practice culminated in the formal submission of all the Mercians to King Edward on the death of Aethelflaed in 918. It is arguable that these territories were created by royal fiat by both fusion and fission of territories which probably already existed. In practical terms the new burhs

became - or rather were created as - the centres of a nexus of tributary relationships whose essence and effectiveness lay the enforcement of the provision of services to the king by the population within the territory which had been created, which of course included work on the construction and maintenance of the burhs themselves.

The structure of the Burghal Hidage, as a systematic perambulation of the burhs of the whole of Wessex (in which I emphatically include, for reasons given below, the burhs at Oxford and Buckingham to the north of the Thames), gives an indication that the same functions must have been built into both the conception and execution of the burghal system in Wessex, seen as a whole. The Burghal Hidage shows that each burh was provided with a territory which was measured in so many hides, the extent of which territory was in very general terms roughly proportional to the size of the burh. Detailed studies which I have made of the burghal territories of Wiltshire and Hampshire show how the territories assigned to their respective burhs can be reconstructed as interlocking units which were laid out at one moment in time within the 'envelope' of the shire, in such a way that their stated hidages in the Burghal Hidage add up to the sum of the hidage values for the shire which can be deduced from the hidages recorded in Domesday Book, with adjustments for the practices of beneficial hidation and the non-recording of hides on royal estates.

A similar process relating to the burghal territories of Wallingford, Oxford, Sashes and Buckingham in later Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire allows these territories to be reconstructed within the single territorial 'envelope' formed by these three later shires. This reconstruction is given in fig.**. Although the total of the hides in Domesday in each of the Wessex shires often falls short of the hidages recorded in the Burghal Hidage, mainly through the omission of hides on unhidated royal estates, there are compelling reasons for concluding (contrary to the prevailing paradigm - see Brooks 1996, 133-42) that the hidage assessments given in the Burghal Hidage in general represent the original assessments of the late ninth century (and probably earlier).

It is the fact that these burghal territories interlock with each other, and thus with the territories within neighbouring shires, which underpins the concept of the burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage as being a complete system which was planned at one moment in time to perform a particular set of functions which would have facilitated King Alfred's overall aims. Given the functions of this system already summarised, there is no reason to believe that the individual places in it were not completed over a relatively short period in such a way as to ensure that the elements of the system as a whole could work together. A contrary view has however been put forward in the recent analysis of David Baker and Stuart Brookes, who have argued in particular that the formation of the burhs in Wiltshire and on both sides of the upper Thames was progressive in nature, being built sequentially in stages into the second decade of the tenth century, and that these (and other burhs in Wessex) were therefore not part of such a system (Baker and Brooks 2011).

This thesis is in my view undermined on several fronts. In the first place, their reconstruction of the burghal territories of Wiltshire, which is seen as demonstrating this hypothesis, is based on the unsustainable premise that it is the Domesday hidage total for Wiltshire of around 4000 hides, rather than the Burghal Hidage total of 4800 hides, which is the primary hidage value of the shire. In this way they are able to write out Cricklade, situated on the Thames, as forming an element in the primary system. This premise implies that Wallingford, also on the Thames, was of secondary origin to a 'core area' of burghal development to the south (Baker and Brookes 2011, 108-9). In the second place, Baker and Brookes simply ignore the evidence for Alfred's control of a swathe of territory on the north side of the Thames, including the London area, in the mid and late 870s (with one major hiccup), which can be inferred from the development of the coinage (Blackburn 1998; Keynes 1998; Blackburn 2003). It is this aspect of King Alfred's political and strategic control of this area during this period which provides the most credible context for the formation of the burhs all over Wessex and the Thames valley, and which included London at a slightly later stage (Haslam 2011).

The importance of the basic premise that the burhs in Wessex formed part of a system, rather than comprising a disparate series which may not even be contemporary - which is the essence of the position espoused by Baker and Brookes - lies in the recognition that the system as a whole functioned as more than just the sum of its parts. This is one aspect of the characteristic of this system of burhs as forming a 'complex social network', which in its theoretical sense carries the implication that they comprised a group of disparate elements whose inter-relationships and inter-reactions were as important as the local functions of the units themselves. In the case of the network of all the 31 burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage in Wessex, the application of this concept can be taken as showing that the overall political and/or strategic rationale for the construction of the network as a whole cannot be read solely from the function of any of the nodes (or particular places) within this network, however important they were.

The burhs as agents of political control

As already suggested, one somewhat neglected aspect of this issue is to recognise that the establishment of this system or network over the whole of Wessex would have had an overarching political function, in the sense that it enabled King Alfred to exert a degree of control over his kingdom in a way which he (or any king of Wessex before him) had not been able to achieve up until that point. I have argued that this was brought about by the creation of the burhs within their territories as nodes within a nexus of tributary relationships, and facilitated by means of the formal submission of the landholders of each of the burghal territories, which became what I have described as 'territories of obligation'. The burhs were not merely convenient or well-placed strong-points within a defensive system, however important this aspect was in the military and strategic context of the times. The burghal system or network as

a whole was, *par excellence*, a means of territorial control in the political sphere through its power to facilitate and enable the enforcement (and probably the coercion) of obligations of the landholders in each of the burghal territories for service to the king. It was in this way that the king was able to ensure not only that the whole realm was provided with the logistical resources to defend itself against Viking depredations, but also that its people were the more strongly bound to his will, in part through his power of confiscation and forfeiture. This could not have been achieved by the piecemeal development of the burhs of Wessex which are listed in the Burghal Hidage as a disparate and non-contemporary series formed in response to local needs, or to fill gaps in a porous and shifting 'frontier' as the occasion demanded, as has been posited by Baker and Brookes.

One of the ways in which this was achieved was, as I have argued, by the provision by the king of a large *haga* or perhaps smaller tenement within the burh to every landholder above a certain standing who held an estate or estates within the particular burghal territory of that burh, in such a way that these urban tenements became part of the rural estate under the same conditions of tenure. I have given reasons for holding that these arrangements were fossilised, albeit in attenuated form, in the pattern of 'contributory burgesses' in many of the Domesday boroughs. This aspect of borough organisation is referred to as 'heterogeneous tenure', in which the holdings in the most ancient boroughs were divided between the king and the tenants-in-chief of the shire. Although the germ of this concept originated with F W Maitland's so-called 'garrison theory' more than a century ago (Maitland 1897, 186-92), it has not been generally accepted as an explanatory model for the development of the Anglo-Saxon town by subsequent historians. It is argued, however, that it was through this means that the king was able to enforce the performance of obligations through the principle of reciprocity, by means of which the gift of land within the new burh to the holder of a rural estate by the king bound the receiver to provide the services which were required of him. An important outcome of this practice was to reinforce the lordship bonds which arose out of obligations to the king derived from the holding of land.

The spatial analysis of the patterns of distribution of the estates which held tenements within the Domesday boroughs, and given in earlier charters, shows that these contributory estates almost invariably lay within, and were limited to, the territories of the boroughs in their earlier status as burhs. This spatial relationship implies both a functional and a temporal relationship between the act of creation of a burh and the formation of the connections to the burh of the individual estates or landholders within its territory. This relationship can therefore be inferred as originating as part of the process through which the burhs were both conceived and built, by the enforcement of the three common obligations for service of fortress-work, bridge-work and service in the *fyrð*, which were the concrete expressions of the tributary relationships of all landholders to the king, described above. This process by which rural estates became tied to the central burh underpinned the ways in which the military and logistic requirements of the construction and maintenance of the burhs were put in place, and the ways

in which this support was both enabled and enforced on the ground. That these connections were often with royal estate centres (and which have survived until the time of Domesday by not being part of the general land market of the period) implies that this practice would have been universal in its application.

These spatial patterns, functions and developmental processes are particularly well illustrated in the case of Wallingford. There are two aspects of this evidence. In the first place, the distribution patterns of the tenements within the borough which paid landgable - a fixed rent payable to the king by the customary burgesses or tenements of the original burh - show that these were intermingled with the tenements of the non-customary tenements who paid their rents to the tenants-in-chief of the burghal territory (Roffe 2009, 35-6). This pattern is also observable in the distribution of tenements paying quit-rents - the successors of the landgable tenements - in the medieval and later periods (Pedgley, this volume). The way that tenements paying these rents are intermingled is also particularly evident in the case of Winchester, as well as Gloucester, Oxford and Cambridge. This evidence suggests strongly that the customary tenements paying landgable to the king, and the non-customary tenements paying rents to the holders of rural manors, appear to have been formed at the same time on the occasion of the formation of the layout of the burhs as planned settlements.

Secondly, as David Roffe has pointed out, a feature of the Domesday account of the borough is the incidence of estate-holders in southern Oxfordshire to the east of the Thames who held appurtenant tenements in the borough (Roffe 2009, 43 & fig. 5.10). Roffe has, quite rightly, inferred from this pattern that this area was included within the original burghal territory of Wallingford, as well as pointing out that the burghal territory of Sashes would also have comprised areas on both sides of the Thames. A detailed analysis of the pattern of these connections in Domesday and earlier charters in Wallingford and its neighbouring burhs of Oxford and Buckingham has shown that the orbits of connection of the estates which are contributory to each centre fit neatly within, and therefore help to define, the primary territories of these burhs as they can be reconstructed from the hidages given in the Burghal Hidage. The results of this analysis are shown in fig. 1.

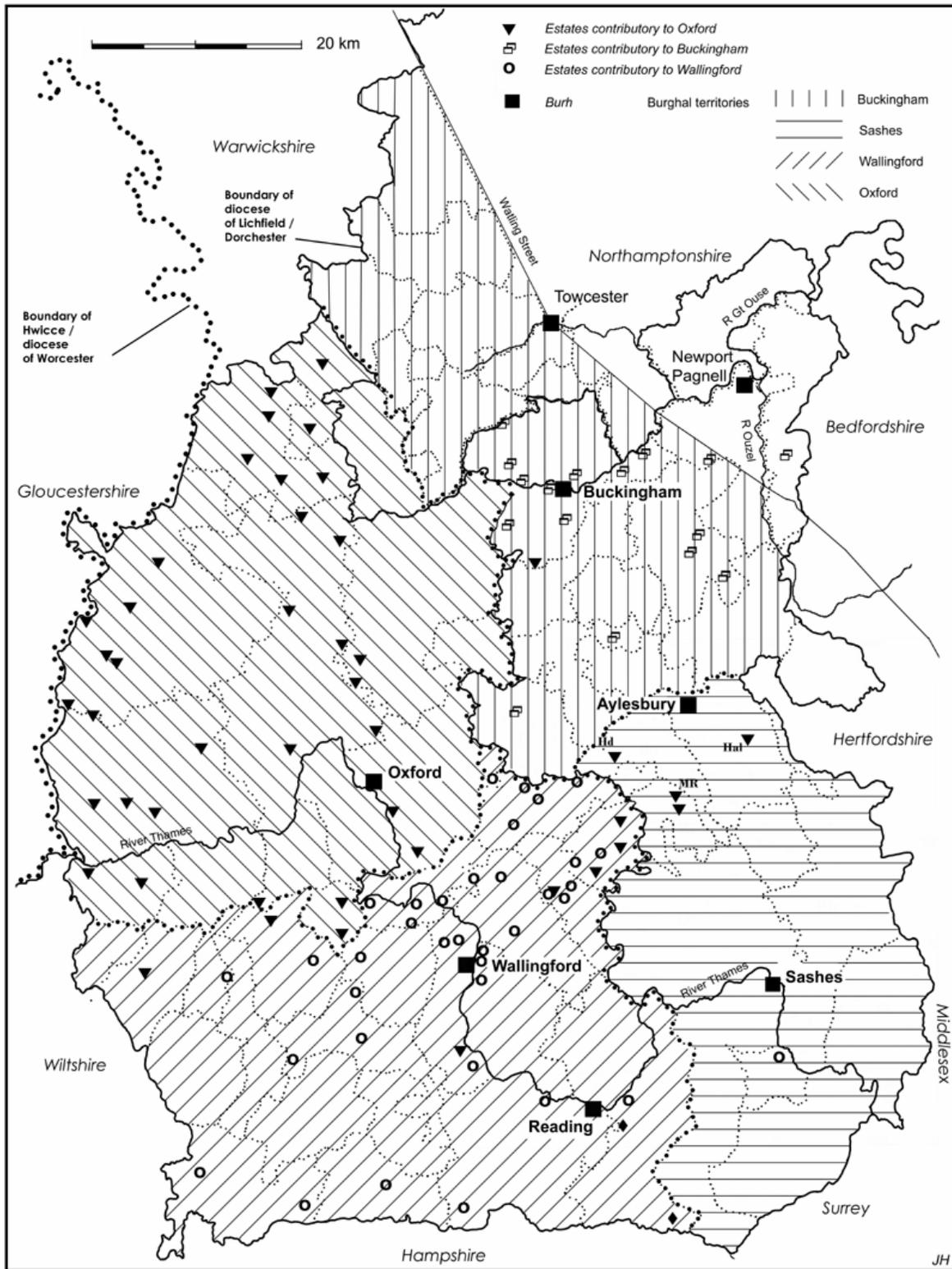


Fig. 1. A reconstruction of the late ninth-century burghal territories of Wallingford, Sashes, Oxford and Buckingham, covering the Domesday shires of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, as well as the south-west part of Northamptonshire (north to top). *Low res image*

There are several observations which can be drawn from this reconstruction. Firstly, it is clear from the analysis of the likely disposition on the ground of the hidages of the four burhs in the upper Thames region (Wallingford, Oxford, Sashes and Buckingham) that they were supported by territories which in the cases of the first three straddled the Thames, forming thereby an interlocking group which disregarded the Thames as a boundary. Wallingford's territory included all of southern Oxfordshire on the eastern side of the Thames; Oxford's territory included a considerable part of the northern Berkshire on the southern side of the Thames; Sashes' territory extended over eastern Berkshire and almost the whole of southern Buckinghamshire; while Buckingham's territory can be most reasonably reconstructed as comprising both the northern part of Buckinghamshire as well as all of later Northamptonshire lying to the south-west of Watling Street. It is this arrangement which fatally undermines the model proposed by Baker and Brookes for the sequential development of the burhs of Wessex from a core area to a boundary marked by the Thames soon after the turn of the ninth century, and from this line across the Thames in the second decade of the tenth century to include Oxford and Buckingham as later developments (Baker and Brookes 2011, 109-112)

Secondly, this exercise in reconstruction has been made possible by the realisation that the original hidage assessment of Oxford would have had to have been 2400 hides rather than the figure given in the Burghal Hidage of 1300 or 1500 hides. This would make its hidation the same as that for Wallingford, to which it was certainly equal in importance in the late ninth century. Thirdly, it is quite clear that there is no way that this reconstructed pattern could be made to fit with the many variables in the evidence if Buckingham and its territory were removed from the equation. In other words, this provides an unequivocal demonstration that a burh at Buckingham must have formed part of the original system comprising all the burhs in Wessex, and that it is indeed listed in its rightful place in the rational and systematic clockwise circuit given in the Burghal Hidage. It could not have been a later addition, as has been invariably thought. This conclusion also removes any necessity to date the Burghal Hidage as a document to after 914, when Buckingham is first mentioned as a burh (apart from its inclusion in the Burghal Hidage) in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, or to hold that the full completion of the system or interconnecting network of burhs which is described in the Burghal Hidage must be no earlier than this date.

These conclusions fit particularly well with the wider historical and political developments which have affected this area of the upper Thames region in the ninth century. By the early ninth century the area of Domesday Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire probably formed a single *regio* with its centre at Oxford under the control of the kings of Mercia, in a way which is similar to the formation of Hereford, Winchcombe and Tamworth as the centres of comparable units of administration in the west Midlands. This would have provided the context for the incidence of tenements in Oxford which were appurtenant to Steventon in Berkshire to the south of Wallingford, to Pyrton also within the burghal territory of Wallingford on the eastern side of the Thames, to Princes Risborough within the northern part of the territory of Sashes, and to

Twyford within the territory of Buckingham. Family connections between King Alfred and King Burgred of Mercia had ensured that by the middle of the 850s Berkshire had been absorbed into West Saxon territory. By the mid 870s the whole of the area immediately north of the Thames, including London, had come under the control of Alfred, which enabled him to mint coins in his own name in London and probably Oxford, and to put in place a far-reaching reform of the coinage (Blackburn 1998; Keynes 1998; Blackburn 2003; Haslam 2011).

This territory to the north of the Thames was, however, lost to Alfred for a short time as a result of the combination of the so-called Partition of Mercia in 877, and the rout of his court and his near capture at Chippenham by the Viking leader Guthrum and his war band in early 878. However, his victory over Guthrum and the Vikings at Edington in the spring of the same year allowed him to regain control of Wessex, which included the area of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire (though not London and its immediate area). The way was thus open to him to build the burghal system in Wessex, which included Wallingford and the three burhs at Oxford, Sashes and Buckingham, one of the purposes of which in the upper Thames area was not only to reassert the king's strategic and economic domination of the upper Thames, but also to exert political and perhaps military pressure on the Viking hold of western Mercia, Northamptonshire and the London area. This enabled his planners to establish the pattern of burghal territories which straddled the Thames in its central reaches, to the end of (re)establishing his political control of the area by the means discussed above.

Later developments

The subsequent development of Wallingford as a centre for local if not regional administration followed a trajectory which can only be fully appreciated when considered in relation to similar developments elsewhere in both Wessex and Mercia. I have argued that the resumption of hostile attention by the Vikings on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from the early 890s resulted in a development of the original network of the burhs of the Burghal Hidage system, firstly by the replacement of the smaller, probably largely unoccupied burhs by new defended sites in which garrisons could be maintained, and secondly by the systematic reinforcement of the earth and timber defences of the primary system with stone walls (Haslam 2009, 98-100, 103-4). Similar developments can be recognised as occurring in western Mercia. The archaeological evidence from Wallingford for the insertion of a stone wall into the primary defences shows that it is likely to have been included in this general upgrade. The operation of a similar process can be recognised from the archaeological evidence from Oxford, where this added wall appears to date from before c.910 (Haslam 2010, 24-28). There are reasons for suggesting that in this process the island burh at Sashes was replaced by new burhs at Aylesbury and Reading to the north and the south of the Thames, the new burghal territory of the latter comprising the eastern part of later Berkshire. In exactly the same way and for the same reasons the burghal fort at Eashing in Surrey was replaced by a new burh at Guildford; and in Devon, Halwell was replaced by Totnes and Pilton by Barnstaple (Haslam 1984).

It is also suggested that the formation of the shires of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, as they appear in Domesday Book, was the result of processes which can be taken back to the 960s. At this time of peace from the destructive attentions of the Vikings the full functionality of the burghal system over the whole of both Wessex and western Mercia appears to have lapsed, and the political and administrative geography of the area took on a new form, possibly as the proximate result of the partition of Wessex and Mercia as separate kingdoms in the late 950s (albeit for only a short time) and the appointment of Aelfhere as the new ealdorman of the whole of Mercia in 960 (Williams 1982). In this process the control of northern Berkshire would have reverted to Wallingford, the control of southern Oxfordshire would have changed from Wallingford to Oxford, and the functions of the burh at Reading would have been subsumed by the administrative centre at Wallingford.

In these ways the new shire of Berkshire was born from the burghal territories of the late ninth and early tenth centuries, with the Thames as one of its boundaries. At a rather earlier date the original burghal territory of Buckingham would have been truncated by the formation of the burghal territory of Towcester, carved out of it in 917 on its formation as a new burh of Edward the Elder. The process of the formation of shires in this way can also be recognised very clearly in the west Midlands, with the new shires of Warwickshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire, Gloucestershire, Winchcombeshire and Herefordshire being formed at this time by the amalgamation and fission of the earlier burghal territories. In this process of political reorganisation the old burh of Wallingford would have taken on new and extended functions as a centre of royal administration, leading to the development of the Honour of Wallingford and its enhanced status as a royal centre (Keats-Rohan 2009; Roffe 2009; Roffe this volume) in perhaps the early eleventh century.

Endnote

1. I have developed the following arguments, and the evidential bases for the many assertions in this section, in a forthcoming book: *Urban-rural Connections in Domesday Book and Late Anglo-Saxon Royal Administration*, to which readers are directed for details and references. This section is therefore very much a short summary of recent work.

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