

CHAPTER I - STAPLEFORD-EARLY DAYS

Introduction

Before the Norman Conquest

More than fourteen centuries ago Anglo-Saxon invaders landed on the eastern shores of Britain and then began to make their way inland. Desolate along the shores and much wooded inland, the best means of progress was by way of the river valleys; from the Humber, up the Trent, spreading out along its tributaries as they slowly advanced further and further inland, choosing sites which best suited them in their programme of settlement.

In the valley of the Erewash they found such a site to their liking, at a point where the track (one should hardly speak of roads in this vicinity at that remote time) from Derby (the *Derventio* of the Romans) to Nottingham (the *Tigguocobauc* of the Britons) crossed the river. Whether the site was completely new or whether they drove off or killed such of the natives as may have been we do not know, but what scant information that does exist suggests that Stapleford is of Saxon origin.

The name: Stapleford

Its name is Saxon: “Stapul” meaning a post and “ford” a passable part of a stream or river, thus “a ford marked by a post or staple” but other interpretations are on record such as “a stable(firm) ford”, “The ford leading to the post of staple”, as well as more elaborate and fanciful ones. Unlike so many place-names Stapleford has, in essence, remained the same since its record in the Domesday Book. Such variations that are found are probably the result of the scribe’s own interpretation of how the name should be spelled, slurred speech on the part of the giver of information, or dialectal pronunciation: Stableford, Stapulford, Stapelford, Stapilford are Stappelford appear most frequently in documents, and whilst there is no doubt that it could not be found in any official record, the colloquial appellation “Stabbo” must not be left unnoted. Another, and more tangible pointer to our Saxon origin is the old cross which now stands in the churchyard and is ascribed to the period covered by the years 670-789; a period in time when Mercia was ruled by the Kings Ethelred, Coenred, Coelred, Ethelbold, Beornred and the more famous Offa. It is a witness in stone to a Christian community flourishing here long before the mention of any church.

The site

The site chosen by the settlers was fertile, well-watered, and no doubt well wooded; up to a point it was sheltered by the hills to the east, the west, and to some degree on the north. The Erewash provided all the water required for their cattle and for

the man himself although springs, or wells (le Dernewell-the secret spring, Wellspringdale, and le Wellhirste-the spring in the wood on the hill, are to mention but three) were to be found thus enabling his wife “to hae some soft water tae wash her sen wi”. In later centuries, inventories appended to wills made mention of “lead pumps” and the paraphernalia appurtenant to wells (the wind and the bucket type) thus testifying to the easy accessibility of fresh water.

The time of the Danelaw

At the time of which we are speaking Stapleford was in the Kingdom of Mercia but later, after the Danish conquest of the northern and eastern parts of England, it fell within the Danelaw and with the division of the realm into counties and shires it found itself within the borders of Nottinghamshire and in the Hundred or Wapentake of Broxtowe. Very rarely, if ever, these days do we have occasion to refer to this division of the county known as the Hundred, but during much of the period covered by this history it plays an important part in the affairs of the parish. Every Hundred had its appointed meeting-place, or moot-stowe, from which it, naturally, took its name, and to which meeting in early times every vill sent its representative-the priest, the reeve and six villeins.

Domesday Survey of 1086

The reason for the survey

Stapleford possesses no Saxon charters and the growth and evolution of the village and its environs during the pre-Conquest period is a matter of complete obscurity. Like so many English villages, the first recorded reference to its existence occurs in Domesday Book, that all embracing survey made in 1086 on the orders of William the Conqueror. He had come to the conclusion that he was not getting a sufficient return from the Geld and decided, therefore, to cause a survey of the whole country to be made to ascertain the taxable potential and so form the basis for a more lucrative return to the Geld. The survey, or inquest as it is sometimes referred to, was made on similar lines throughout the country, but the details resulting from this vary considerably from place to place. However, Stapleford is our only concern and the brief and, at first glance, seemingly meaningless phrases do tell us of the situation so long ago.

The text

“Four manors in Stapleford, Ulci-Cilt, Staplewin, Godwin and Gladwin had 2 carucates of land and 6 bovates assessed to the Geld. There is land for 3 ploughs. William has in demesne there, Robert holds of him, 3 ploughs and 6 villeins with 6 ploughs and 2 bondsmen. There is a priest and a church and 58 acres of meadow. Value in King Edward’s time 60 shillings. Now 40s”. Let us see what can be made of this. Remember, these entries are the answers to a set of questions asked by the

Commissioners of the Jurors summoned before them; the inquest, for such it was, was held county by county and the Commissioners for the various circuits were magnates who held no land in those circuits. Present at the meeting, which was in all probability a shire-moot, were the Sheriff, the barons who held direct from the King, their French sub-tenants, all those who owed suit to the Hundred-moot, and the priest, the reeve, and six villeins from every vill (where population allowed this). The answers cover three points in time, i.e. in the time of King Edward the Confessor, at the time of the Conquest (1066) and at the time of the Inquest (1086).

The owners before the Conquest

Before the Conqueror the Saxon owners were Ulci-cilt, Staplewin, Godwin and Gladwin and jointly they had 2 carucates (or hides) and 6 bovates (there were 8 bovates to the carucate) assessed to the Geld. (They also held land severally in Gonalston, Wollaton, Selston, Thrumpton and Sandiacre.) This means that they had some 330 acres, (assuming, of course, that in Stapleford a carucate consisted of 120 acres which is generally accepted as its extent, although in parts of the country it is known to vary) which were rated to the tax when this should be levied. It should be born in mind that the amount of land assessed to the Geld was notional and not areal, the actual acreage under cultivation was probably greatly divergent from this figure of 330 acres, however real it may have been at some earlier point in time. The Geld (Danegeld) was an occasional war tax, first levied by Ethelred II of Northumbria, the proceeds of which were used by him to bribe the Danish invaders to return home. In later years especially under the Conqueror, it was used as a general levy. The land on which Geld was payable was arable; waste, uninhabited and uncultivated land was not geldable.

At the time of the Conquest the area of arable works out (in theory at least) 360 acres; sufficient for 3 plough teams of eight oxen to plough in one year.

William Peverel and Robert Heriz: holders and utilisation in 1086

Twenty years later we find that the original owners have disappeared; dead, disposed or degraded, and that William Peverel has Stapleford as part of his demesne and which he has let out to Robert, whose surname we know to be Heriz. In these years since the coming of the Normans things have improved somewhat and Robert Heriz had 3 plough teams on his demesne and 2 slaves to help in the running of it; these 2 men and their families lived within the curtilage of the manor house and were maintained by him. There are now 6 villeins each, presumably, with a plough, but as the usual holding for a villein is considered to be a virgate of 30 acres it does not seem practical that the villeins plough teams would be full ones of eight oxen. There was no room in a tight economy for an excess of oxen to be eating their heads off and giving little or no work in return. For thus land which they held the villeins laboured for 2 or 3 days every week on the demesne lands along with the slaves, and at ploughing time their oxen and ploughs would be called upon to augment the

demesne plough-teams and thus would be engaged in ploughing for the lord as well as for themselves. (And a busy time was had by all!) These 9 plough-teams (of whatever number of oxen they are composed) represent the cultivated area in 1086.

Priest and church

The next part of the entry refers to the priest and the church but gives us no information as to how this cleric comes to be appointed or how he is to be supported. The priests of Doomsday times were often of the villein class rather than of the freeholders; a fact which suggests that the villein, although labouring under many vexatious burdens, was, to some extent, regarded as a free man; certainly a rung or two further up the social ladder than the bordars and slaves. It is more than likely that Robert Heriz appointed our priest, either on recommendation or perhaps by selection from one of his tenant families of a son who had entered the church. A land-less church was a rarity and most were possessed of property (however small the amount) in the shape of glebe, tithes and dues, all of which would go towards the maintenance of the priest who, in all probability, would also have a portion of land to cultivate; like the excess oxen, the economics of a small community, such as Stapleford was, would not permit the feeding of a completely non-productive mouth.

Meadow

The penultimate item is the 58 acres of meadow. This may not seem a very large area but it constituted approximately 5% of the total area of the parish of some 1200 acres. It must be remembered that areal measurement in mediaeval times varied in different parts of the country; today we use a rod (pole or perch) of 16 ½ feet, but at that time this could vary from 15 feet to 20 feet and, in some localities, even more than that. Eighteen feet to the rod seems to have been particularly common and if we allow for an acre measured by a rod of that length then the 58 acres of meadow of 1086 covers an area remarkably approximate to the meadows of the 18th century; that part of the parish today bounded by Sandiacre Road, Derby Road, Bessel Lane (extended to the Toton boundary), the River Erewash to the bridge and then the parish boundary with Sandiacre following the old course of the river.

Pasture, waste and woods

It has probably been noticed that no pasture, waste, or woods are mentioned. Their absence from the entry does not imply absence in actuality; all three must have been in existence for all three had their part to play. Pasture was a necessary adjunct to the meadow-land but was evidently regarded as taken for granted; its acreage and position in the parish can only be one of conjecture, but I consider that perhaps much of it was contained either the area north of the meadow land bounded on the west by the river, to the north by Trowell Road and on the east by Pasture Road. The waste or scrubland, though not mentioned, must have existed. The whole of the 1200 acres was certainly not under the plough, or meadow, or pasture, and therefore we are left with the fact that quite a large proportion must have been scrubland and common land on which cattle could also be grazed. The area which, by virtue of its names in later centuries, suggests itself, is that part of Stapleford north of Moor-

bridge Lane, Trowell Road, and Ilkeston Road incorporating the area on which stands the Hemlock Stone, and bounded by Coventry Lane. The wood-land was a most necessary and integral part of the vill's life for without wood readily at hand a vill could neither have come into being nor flourished; in spite of the regulations and restrictions (as far as the peasants were concerned) governing its uses, a well-wooded area was essential. Of course it is impossible to know where the woods lay, or of their extent; they may have formed a very irregular pattern on the parish checker-board, but this we shall never know.

Value

It will be noted that the value (tax) had decreased by one third. Taxable (or Geldable) at a figure of 60 shillings (approximately 20 shillings to the carucate) in the time of King Edward, it was now only 40 shillings. Was this reduction due to, perhaps, a decrease in the prosperity of the vill or, perhaps, a reduction in the amount payable to the Geld engineered by William Peverel or Robert Heriz? The foregoing statistics in the entry suggest the opposite of the first supposition, and as to the second, well, this is only one explanation but "beneficial hidation", as it is called, is known to have taken place. Without being entirely freed from the Geld a manor or vill, could be rated at a smaller number of carucates (fiscal) than it contained.

Mill

One important item is missing: Stapleford had no mill. In a vill of some 10 families there probably was not enough work to warrant one, the corn being either ground by means of querns or perhaps sent to a mill on another holding of Robert Heriz.

Summary

To sum up; we have a vill some 45 souls, upwards of 500 acres of arable land which would be fairly evenly distributed in three fields, 58 acres of meadows, an unknown (though conjectured) amount of pasture and scrubland, and an unknown area of woodlands. A church, more than likely standing on or near to the site of the present day St Helens, and the village situated along either side of present day Church Street. The location of the Manor House-put it where you will, but more on this subject later.