DOMESDAY BLAKENEY

By John Wright

The aim of this article is to make some explanatory comments on the Domesday entries for Blakeney. Unfortunately, this is not as easy as it sounds, for much of the content of the Domesday Book is not at all clear. In any case, it is difficult to study villages individually for in East Anglia there is no simple correspondence between village and manor. Just as one manor may have jurisdiction in several villages, so one village may owe allegiance to several manors. Any village, Blakeney included, therefore needs to be examined in relation to the pattern of landholding. A further aspect is that many of the social and economic conditions portrayed by Domesday are best seen from a study of the whole area, and the significance of the entries for one village may well be clearer after comparison with entries elsewhere. This article therefore looks at some of the features of Domesday not just for Blakeney but for the whole of the area known as Holt Hundred.

The Blakeney Entries

The Domesday survey was conducted remarkably quickly during 1086, although why King William wanted it done 20 years after his Conquest is not entirely clear. In 1084 William raised a large army to meet a new Danish threat and billeted it on the principal landlords. This process revealed evidence of out-of-date valuations and it was probably this which precipitated the Domesday survey: to discover how much land there was, what it was worth, and who held it – rightfully or not. The returns were completed by Hundred, with the help of local juries, and written up according to the major landholdings.

The three entries for Blakeney are set out on the next page, although Domesday used the name Snitterley (various spellings) in place of Blakeney. It is sometimes supposed that the original village of Snitterley was lost to the sea but it is rather more likely that the name Blakeney, perhaps associated with a small fishing settlement as well as being the name of a haven for early medieval shipping, gradually supplanted that of Snitterley.

Landholders

The three Blakeney entries relate to three different landholders: the King himself and two of his tenants-in-chief (those holding directly from the King). Sub-tenants are rarely mentioned in Domesday, the reference to William of Noyers holding in Blakeney from Bishop William is interlined in the original text.

In the 28 parishes of Holt Hundred (including Salthouse and Saxlingham which are listed elsewhere at Domesday) there are only 13 principal landholders in addition to the King. Of these 14 people, the King had an interest in 14 parishes. Bishop William in 9 and Walter Gifford in 6, five others in 2 or 3 parishes each and six in 1 only. Similarly, of the 28 parishes, 10 had a single landholder (the King or the Bishop in 9 cases), 16 had two and only 2 (Blakeney and Hunworth) divided their allegiance between three. Blakeney is therefore unusual in having three landlords and alone in having the three principal landlords of the Hundred.

DOMESDAY: THE ENTRIES FOR BLAKENEY

The King

King Edward held HOLT, 2 c. of land.....

There is also one outlier, CLEY, at 2 c. of land.....

Further 1 outlier, in BLAKENEY, at 1 c. of land.
Always 7 villagers; 1 smallholder.
Always 1 men's plough.
Value then £20, 1 night's honey and 100s in customary dues;
now £50 at face value. Holt and Cley have 2 leagues in length and l in width, 2s 4[d] in tax.
Before 1086, 8 free men belonged to this manor, at 3½ c. of land; now Walter Gifford holds them by livery of the King, so his men state. Further, there belonged to this manor 1 free man, 23 acres; now Earl Hugh holds them.

1 outlier in HEMPSTEAD appertains to this manor, at 30 acres .....

Bishop William

Land of the Bishop ofThetford belonging to the bishopric before 1066.....

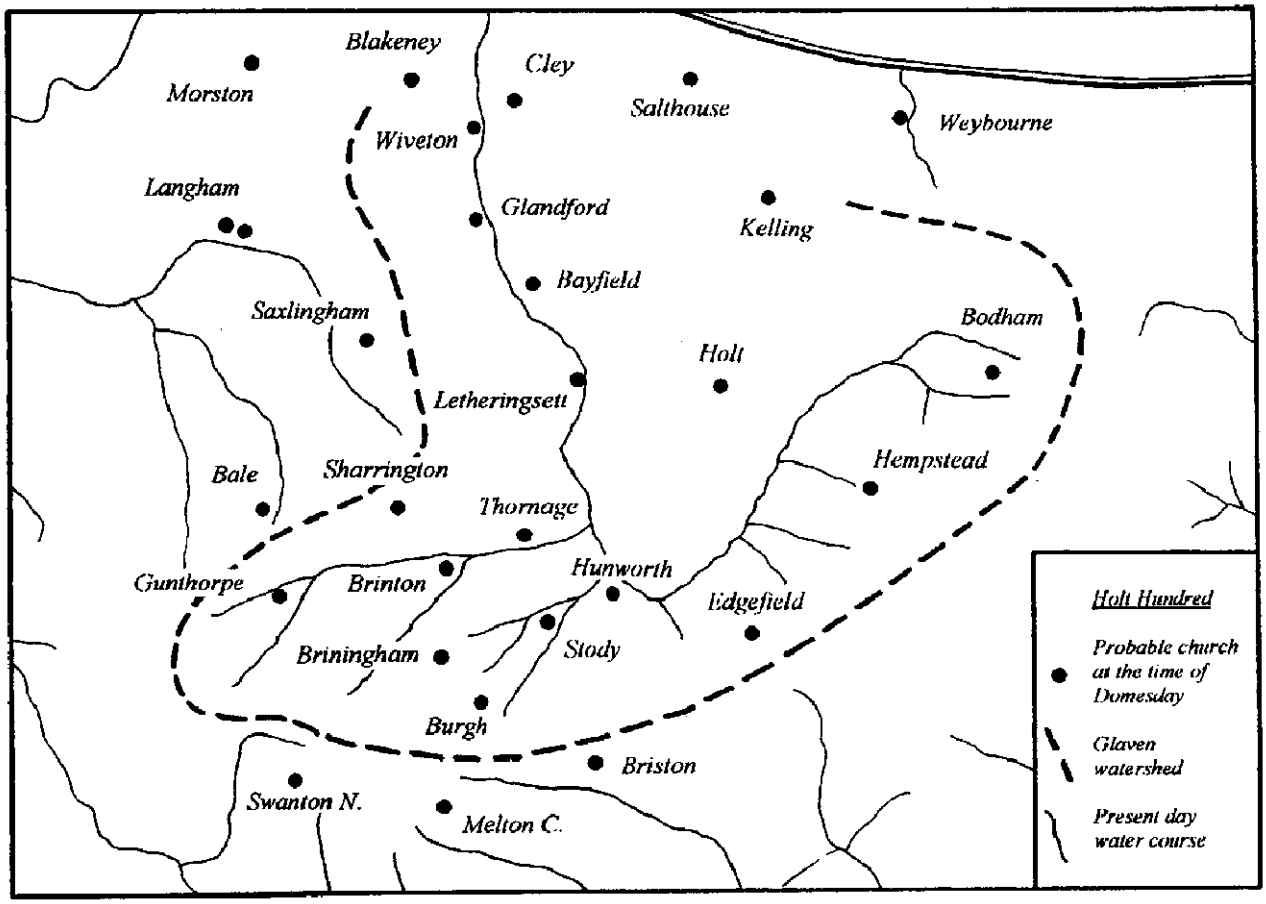
In BLAKENEY W[illiam] ofNoyers [holds] from Bishop W[illiam];
Edric held under King Edward freely [from] Harold, 2 c. of land.
Always 2 villagers; 25 smallholders; 1 slave.
Always 2 ploughs in lordship; 2 men's ploughs.
Meadow, 3 acres; 1 mill.
Also 4 freemen, at 24 acres; ½ plough.
Value of the whole before 1086 40s; now £4.
1 church; 30 acres; value 16d.

Walter Gifford

In BLAKENEY Toki held 30 acres under Harold.
Then 1 plough, now ½.
Value then 5s, now 10s.

Nothing need be said here about the King, but Bishop William, of Beaufour in Calvados, was a royal clerk before his nomination as bishop in 1085. It was his successor, Herbert Losinga, who moved the See from Thetford to Norwich, probably in 1095. Walter Gifford, later Earl of Buckingham, was the son of the Walter who was a cousin of the King and who accompanied him at the Conquest. William of Noyers probably took his name form Noyers in Calvados.

The three Norman landlords in Blakeney displaced Anglo-Saxon predecessors: Bishop Aelmer, Edric and Toki. The name Edric appears in many Norfolk Domesday entries and the probability is that several different people are being referred to. The name Toki also appears elsewhere but often the succeeding landlord is Walter of Warenne which may indicate that one person of that name did have substantial holdings – but not in Holt Hundred.



People

The Blakeney entries, as translated, distinguish between freemen, villagers, smallholders and slaves, categories which have no standard definitions.

In other parts of England slaves (or serfs – *servi* in the latin) did much of the manual labour, especially the ploughing, and had little or no land thereby needing an allowance of food in exchange for their labour. In East Anglia, however, slaves were relatively few and their numbers were falling. Half of the parishes in Holt Hundred had no slaves at all and in the remainder the average number was three. Blakeney, with one slave, is therefore 'average' in this respect. There is some indication that the distribution of slaves in the Hundred was very roughly proportional to the rest of the population, but this has not been tested statistically.

The term smallholder (*bordarius*) denoted a person of inferior status with some land, perhaps around 5 acres, while the villager (*villanus*) usually had more status and more land, typically 30 acres in some parts of the country. Smallholders had few oxen, often none at all, and may have lived away from the main village. The villagers often had a trade (blacksmith, miller etc) or some special responsibility in the manorial system; some were rich enough to rent manors while others were no better off than the smallholders. In total, Domesday records some 100,000 villagers and 85,000 smallholders and cottagers.

However, national generalisations do not necessarily apply to Holt Hundred. Most noticeably, smallholders are far more numerous than villagers – and almost half of all parishes had no villagers at all. The proportions of the two classes vary from 31 villagers and 7 smallholders in Langham, to 24 of each in Holt, and to 0 villagers and 16 smallholders in Gunthorpe. Nevertheless, villagers are always listed first which seems to confirm their higher status in the minds of the Domesday compilers. With 9 villagers and 26 smallholders Blakeney is again typical of the Hundred. It may not be coincidental that the royal estate of Holt and its outliers of Cley and Blakeney have over one third of all villagers in the Hundred.

Free men have been described as the 'lower middle classes' of their day. Domesday makes a distinction between sokemen (*sochemanni*) with more status than villagers but not necessarily more land, and free men (*liberi homines*) who seem to have ranged from high rank to peasant status. Some 23,000 sokemen and 14,000 free men are listed in Domesday, the great majority of them in eastern England.

It appears that sokemen originally owed allegiance directly to the King and when land passed out of royal control the sokemen still paid tax to the King but through the new landlord rather than directly. In Domesday they are recorded not as chattels of the estate but separately at the end as if in an appendix. They were not tied to an estate but could go elsewhere, though the sokeman status would then stay with the land and the new occupier. In Norfolk, concentrations of sokemen often indicate former royal estates. Holt is an exception for it has no sokemen at all, though some of those listed elsewhere, including the four at Blakeney, are linked with Holt.

Free men other than sokemen are rare in the Hundred and are more common in the scattered settlements of south-east Norfolk, where their status may have arisen as outlying farms became independent of former estates. Free men usually 'commended' themselves to the protection of a particular landlord. No such free men are listed for Blakeney.

The great majority of people recorded in Domesday appear to have been men, but whether these are heads of households or include all of working age is not clear. Specialised trades are rarely mentioned though they must have existed. It is therefore difficult to estimate what the population of any particular settlement might have been. Most attempts employ a multiplier (equating roughly to household size) to convert recorded adults to total population. Some early authors suggested 3.5 while later ones have increased the multiplier to 5.0 or more – higher if attempting to populate large areas where various omissions can be demonstrated. In Blakeney a figure of 4.5 would expand the 40 recorded adults to a total population of 180 – but this could still be an under-estimate.

Land

The Blakeney entries describe area in terms of carucates and acres. The carucate derives from the latin *carruca*, a plough or ploughteam, and is often understood to represent 120 acres – equivalent to a 'hide' in areas outside Danish influence. The acre may have had the same value as now (eg 220 x 22 yards) but uniformity is unlikely. At one time the hide was taken to represent the land required to support a substantial free man's household, though it was essentially a unit of account rather than a physical area of land. Hence the virgate of 30 acres (a quarter hide) and the bovate of 15 acres (one eighth). The easy relationship of 120 acres to 240 pence in the pound is probably not coincidental.

It is with this in mind that one should read the Blakeney entries: 1 carucate, 2 carucates, 30 acres (a quarter carucate), and 24 acres (one fifth). Such values seem too rounded to denote a precise area of land, though the 3 acres of meadow might be such a measure.

Some authors have looked to the number of ploughs as a better indication of the amount of arable land, but this does not improve understanding of the Blakeney entries. On the King's carucate, for example, 8 householders had one plough, convenient for the usual equation of 8 oxen to one plough. However, in Cley 48 householders had 12 ploughs and the figures for Holt are very similar.

Neither is the pattern of land use any easier to determine. The ploughs imply arable land (and cereals) and 3 acres of meadow are specified in Blakeney. Meadow was normally found in river valleys or at least where water could accelerate growth. Blakeney has no river valley so the meadow might have been outside the parish –although the Domesday water table would have been higher than today's and there might then have been springs and watercourses within the parish.

Woodland is not mentioned in Blakeney nor in any of the 8 parishes which make up the north-eastern quarter of the Hundred – in contrast to the remainder where woodland is recorded according to the number of pigs that could be fattened there during the autumn. This suggests that woodland was being used as 'woodpasture' rather than for coppicing as in later periods. The two uses are incompatible because of the damage that rooting pigs do to young growth. Was there coppiced woodland in the Blakeney area not recorded in Domesday? Possibly, but the relatively high population density in Langham, Blakeney, Cley and Wiveton suggests that woodland must have been relatively sparse.

Animals

Though there are none in Blakeney, animals are mentioned in two-thirds of the Holt Hundred parishes, with sheep having the highest numbers (about 1200), followed by pigs (c.220), goats (c.l 20), and then cows (40). Dairy farming was not a feature of Domesday agriculture and villagers would have obtained their milk, cheese and butter from ewes and goats rather than from cows; some of the sheep would have been pastured on the salt marshes. The distribution of pigs does not coincide with that of woodland: the highest number of pigs is at Wiveton (34) which had no recorded woodland at all. Only the rich could afford to keep a horse and only a few, all described as cobs, are recorded. Oxen are not mentioned at all, even though they were used to draw the ploughs. A total of 11 beehives are listed in 4 parishes, the nearest to Blakeney being the two at Letheringsett.

Mills

In the Domesday entries Blakeney has one mill. This must have been a watermill because the first windmills were not built until a century later. Most mills were built across a watercourse or else were operated by leets taking water from higher up the valley. Mill technology was well developed – one 11th century mill is known to have had three wheels turned by water flowing through a massive artificial ditch running for more than a kilometre across a bend in the Thames. Often it was only the lord who could assemble the necessary capital and labour to build a mill but some were built by tenants acting together. Some mills were for the lord's produce only, others served the whole village.

By Norfolk standards the Glaven, whose valley almost defines Holt Hundred, is a short river flowing from high ground; it is therefore relatively fast and numerous mills can be expected. Domesday records a total of 21 including the one at Blakeney but excluding the one at Langham (on a tributary of the river Stiffkey) and those at Weybourne (where a separate stream flows direct to the sea).

In many cases the mills recorded will have been sited within the relevant parish. The position of Blakeney mill, however, is open to speculation. The village may have had the use of one somewhere on the Glaven; another possibility is south-east of the church where a shallow valley running down to Wiveton might have contained a stream at the time of Domesday. The Wiveton mills, too, might have been on a side stream because the Glaven was then tidal at least as far as Glandford.

Churches

Blakeney is one of only six parishes in Holt Hundred to have had a church in 1086 according to Domesday. The only ones listed close to Blakeney were the two churches at Langham. All seven churches were on Bishop William's holdings; all were endowed with between 6 and 32 acres of land and were valued at between 5d and 16d (16d being the value of the Danish *ora*). In terms of acreage and value, Blakeney is the most significant.

Although Domesday mentions few churches in Holt Hundred, or in the county generally, there is evidence to suggest that there would have been a church in almost every village – and sometimes two, giving rise to separate parishes (as at Langham and Stiffkey). Some of the churches not mentioned in Domesday have architectural features which could date back to that period. These churches tend to be the very smallest, for the larger and more prosperous settlements were able to rebuild. At Blakeney, the Domesday church appears to have been rebuilt in the later 13th century, the chancel remaining when the nave was rebuilt again in the 15th century.

It can sometimes be shown that churches have been rebuilt on the same site and the initial supposition must be that the foundations of the Domesday church in Blakeney lie under the present one. Nevertheless, the Blakeney hilltop site is unusual in this area: some churches are on high ground (Langham) but many are on mounds close to water (Morston, Cley, Wiveton, Glandford). A shift in the site of Blakeney church cannot be ruled out – if this has happened then the earlier (ie pre-Domesday) site might have been in the (hypothetical) Saxon village of Snitterley which itself would have been close to a source of water (and with sufficient land to support the Domesday population). On present evidence, however, the site of the Domesday church should be sought in the present churchyard.

Value

The basis for Domesday valuations is thought to be the market rent that might be obtained for the holding, though the valuations given have no clear relationship to the apparent size of the holding. Many holdings were farmed (ie rented out to tax collectors), a system which increased the likelihood of exploitation of the inhabitants as the farmers sought to increase their takings over and above the rent (or tax) to be paid.

Initially, royal manors were charged with providing so many nights' provisions for the King and his household when they visited the district. This is the origin of the reference at Blakeney to one night's provision of honey, the only sweetening substance then available. In Norfolk generally valuations in 1086 were some 40% higher than those for 1066 but at Blakeney the valuations of all three holdings had exactly doubled – perhaps an indication that it was the settlement as a whole that was being considered rather than each holding separately.

This certainly happened in paying the geld, a tax paid to the pre-Norman kings to buy off (or fight off) the Danes and to provide a royal revenue. This was often levied at 2 shillings per carucate, sometimes more. Many royal manors did not pay geld but instead had to make large contributions directly to support the king, and other manors gained partial exemption over the years. In Norfolk, villages appear to have been combined into 'leets' which often paid 2 shillings in total. Langham alone, for example, paid 2 shillings while Wiveton paid Is 5½d and Glandford 6½d, making 2s in total. A few parishes in Holt Hundred, Blakeney among them, paid no geld.

The tax values are accompanied by the dimensions of the village: Langham is defined as 1 league in length and 1 in breadth. The Domesday league is generally thought to have been 12 furlongs (1½ miles), but what was being measured is not clear. If a physical area is being indicated then the size of Langham was 1440 acres, so too were Wiveton and Hempstead. Holt and Cley together were twice as large and 5 parishes were assessed at half this figure (720 acres). It is doubtful, however, whether measurements should be interpreted in this way.

Conclusion

The main conclusion running like a theme through all these notes is the uncertainty about what the Domesday entries actually mean. While the entries will indicate at least the presence of the features described, the values given will not normally be the actual quantities in 1086. Neither does the term 'always' necessarily mean 'no change' between 1066 and 1086 – it could also mean that the 1066 values were unknown. Furthermore, omissions cannot be taken as proof that the features were absent. This uncertainty is a considerable qualification on the value of Domesday for an individual village and means that any simple interpretation is likely to be incorrect or at least incomplete.

Notes

Domesday translation: Phillipa Brown (ed.), *Domesday Book: Norfolk* (2 vols), Phillimore, 1984.

Other references: R. Weldon Finn, *Domesday Book: A Guide*, Phillimore, 1973.
H.Loynes, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conques*t, Longman, 1991
Tom Williamson, *The Origins of Norfolk*, Manchester U.P., 1993.