

**Domesday Tamworth: a Ghost within the Book**  
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In 1086 Tamworth was already a borough with a long history, as we have already heard this weekend. For reasons that are still not fully understood, it never became the administrative centre of a shire in the late tenth or early eleventh century like the neighbouring Stafford and Warwick. Nevertheless, characterized by burgess tenure and a degree of tenurial heterogeneity, it probably had something of a similar status. With such a profile we might well expect a detailed account of the borough in Domesday Book, but we do not find it. There is notice of burgesses of Tamworth in entries relating to the royal manors of Drayton Bassett and Wigginton in the Staffordshire folios and Coleshill in Warwickshire. Otherwise the borough is conspicuous by its absence.

It was usual practice for boroughs to be enrolled in Great Domesday Book (GDB) at the beginning of the account of each shire. Whereas rural estates are listed by landholder with each assigned a separate chapter, boroughs were entered as communities, above the salt as it were. In escaping notice in this way, Tamworth is in good company. Most famously, both London and Winchester are absent, although a space was apparently left in the text for the insertion of each. As with Tamworth, burgesses belonging to rural manors in the vicinity are widely recorded, but the Domesday scribe never got round to inserting a composite account of each. The omissions have been widely lamented, but have been deemed readily understandable. It has been suggested that the society of the one was so complex that it defied economical summary, while the other was already adequately described in the earlier Winton Domesday. By contrast, a more prosaic reason has been put forward for the absence of Tamworth: the borough straddled the county boundary between Staffordshire and Warwickshire and it has been suggested that the commissioners of each assumed that the others had enrolled the town with the result that neither group did so.

As much as we might credit the idea of bureaucratic incompetence, it is clear at the outset that this explanation is unsatisfactory. There are two basic objections. First, it is now known that both Staffordshire and Warwickshire were surveyed in the same circuit, conventionally known as number IV. Previous analyses have assigned Staffordshire to the West Midlands circuit, but the enrolment of some Staffordshire estates in the Warwickshire and Oxfordshire folios and Warwickshire estates in Staffordshire indicates that the two shires were surveyed together. They were therefore subject to the same group of commissioners.

Second, those commissioners were not responsible for compiling the composite accounts of boroughs. Examination of documentation from the early stages of the inquiry shows that towns were surveyed by landholder just like rural estates. It wasn't commissioners who compiled the composite account but the GDB scribe himself. The various sources that he brought together can often be identified in the text. The account of Wallingford in Berkshire, for example, is a rather uneasy amalgam of bits and pieces. The question, then, is why it was the Domesday scribe omitted Tamworth. The task was certainly not beyond him. Stamford was situated in no less than three counties, namely Lincolnshire, Northampton, and *Roteland*, but he nevertheless managed to cobble

together a coherent account which he entered in the Lincolnshire folios. I would suggest that he expected to do likewise here. The blank space at the head of the Staffordshire folios was probably intended for the enrolment of both parts of the borough. But the task eluded him. Needing to consult at least four sources for the two counties, he may simply that failed to get the information in time.

Can we do better? Well, yes, we can! Or at least we can reconstruct something of the borough in the late eleventh century. The task is not as difficult as it might be. There has long been much regret over the inadequacies of the Domesday accounts of boroughs. Some are expansive, some are sketchy, none answer all the question we might want to ask. But we should acknowledge that the GDB scribe wrote with more purpose than is always allowed. He had a template, as it were. We see it most clearly in the account of Derby. First comes what is conventionally known as customary lands, that is the lands that owed dues and services to the king, and the value of the borough. There then follow in turn, non-customary fees, either urban liberties or lands that belonged to rural manors, and finally the customs and dues of the king and earl in the shire. Each category presents in a characteristic way in later records which are routinely used to interpret Domesday entries. Tamworth's later history, then, can tell us something of its eleventh-century forms. But it is the Domesday accounts of fees around Tamworth that provide a framework.

So, our starting point is a less obvious characteristic of the Domesday account of the area. Polesworth, Dordon, Bramcote, Freaseley, Hall End, Pooley Hall, and Warton to the east of Tamworth are also missing from the text. In such circumstances one would normally assume that they were subsumed in other entries; Domesday place-names are often those of estates and so their entries might include a number of unnamed settlements. In this instance, however, later manorial histories indicate that this cannot have been the case: the settlements are undoubtedly omitted from the text. Given their proximity to Tamworth, the most obvious conclusion must be that they were part of the borough and omitted with it. This would by no means be unusual. Many boroughs took in a swathe of land in their vicinity. Derby, for example, extended into Little Chester, Quarndon, Little Eaton, and Litchurch, and York into Oswaldwick, Murton, Stockton, Sandburn, Heyworth, Gate Fulford, Clifton, Rawcliffe, Overton, Skelton, Mortun, and Wigginton. The territory of Tamworth is directly comparable.

When we first have evidence for the Tamworth lands in the twelfth century they were constituted as demesne estates of the castle fee. It is almost certain, then, that they were held by Robert Dispenser in 1086. Their context is significant. Robert, the constable of the castle, had been granted lands in half a dozen counties, but it is those in the immediate vicinity of the borough in Warwickshire and Leicestershire that concern us today. Superficially the complex looks like a castlery, that is a block of land that was granted for the support of the fortress at the time of its construction sometime after the Conquest. However, on closer examination it was no such thing.

First, Robert Dispenser's title was derived from a right to the lands of a single pre-Conquest lord. Thus, Æthelmær is named as his only predecessor in all his Warwickshire estates. The record is incomplete for those in Leicestershire, but, apart from an Edwin Alfrith who is said to have held manors in Gartree wapentake, probably erroneously, Æthelmær is again the only name that otherwise occurs. Robert even succeeded to his loanlands, that is leaseholds, which he had held of Peterborough abbey

in Fillongley in Warwickshire with its members of Leire, Snarestone, and Odstone in Leicestershire. Domesday omits the claim, but Peterborough subsequently made good its right to all the lands as well as West Langton held TRE by Æthelmær which had also accrued to the castle fee by the twelfth century.

An English identity for the fee is underlined by the location of the court of the honour. The fee did not meet in the castle itself, as one might expect of a castlery, but out in the sticks at Stipershill between Polesworth and Warton. On balance, I think that we can conclude that the castle fee was an essentially pre-Conquest complex and was held in its entirety by Æthelmær in 1066. This conclusion must suggest that Æthelmær had a pre-eminent role within Tamworth. Long ago, and in a different context, Ann Williams identified him as the brother of Æthelwine the sheriff of Warwickshire and uncle of Æthelwine's successor Thorkil of Warwick. With such a background Æthelmær must surely be identified as the king's reeve, or possibly even staller, in Tamworth and Robert as constable of the castle effectively stepped into his shoes. There were similar antecedents for castle fees at Lincoln, London, Nottingham, and Wallingford.

Such parallels would suggest that as royal administrators of one kind or another both Æthelmær and Robert held their boroughs lands *ex officio* rather than in person. Stipershill, then, was in origin most likely a communal meeting place, probably the borough or perhaps even regional court. Wallingford again provides a parallel: there the *motehall* of the borough was located some two miles outside the defences. The king's hall in Tamworth, by contrast, would have been located within or close to the borough. Popular histories have long asserted that the castle marks the site of a Mercian royal palace. There is an outside chance, however, that the first castle was built to the west of the borough centre where the Moat House now stand. The name 'Le mot' first occurs in the mid fourteenth century and may signify 'motte' rather than 'moat'. If so, then the present castle was most likely built in the early twelfth-century when Roger Marmion was granted the Dispenser fee. Similar changes of site at much the same time are evidenced at Berkeley, Canterbury, and Gloucester. The Moat House, then, too is a possible pre-Conquest royal centre, although its extramural position could suggest that it was entirely new. A site has been inferred for a Middle Saxon hall close to the church, but a fourth, perhaps more likely, possibility for the structure in 1086 is Wigginton to the north. The manor was held by King William in 1086. No lord is recorded for 1066, but the order of entries indicates that it was royal demesne before the Conquest. In the twelfth century Wigginton remained in demesne as far as we know, but in 1238 it was granted together with the borough to Henry de Hastings. In 1266 the Staffordshire portion of Tamworth was said to be soke of Wigginton and its burgesses rendered pannage to the lord of the manor. The close relationship well pre-date the Domesday inquest. Extramural halls are also known at Kingsholm outside Gloucester and Kingsthorpe outside Northampton.

If Wigginton was the primary royal nucleus and the location of the king's hall, the extent of royal demesne within the borough was probably limited. It is likely, though, that St Edith's church belonged to the king. Wulfric Spot made a bequest to a community in Tamworth in the early eleventh century, but this may have been to the nunnery at Polesworth if the settlement was part of the borough as I have argued. Nevertheless, the collegiate church of St Edith's was probably early. Unlike the college in Stafford and those in Gnossal, Penkridge, Tettenhall, and Wolverhampton, it was not claimed as an

ancient royal free chapel exempt from ordinary jurisdiction and it was thus omitted from the compendium chapter in the Staffordshire folios set aside for such foundations. It was, then, probably slated to appear in the account of the king's land in Tamworth. By the twelfth century the advowson had passed to the Marmion family, but in the thirteenth it was again claimed as the right of the crown on the ground that Henry II had held the church and had presented it to one of his clerks.

The number of burgesses who owed customs and services to the king is essentially irrecoverable. As far as I know, no landgabel accounts survive from the later Middle Ages to provide a clue. There are records of the totals renders owed in the thirteenth century, but little indication of how much individual tenements paid. By that time there was burgage tenure in both parts of the borough and all of the burgesses were understood to hold directly of the king in 1266. This may not reflect an earlier reality. In 1249 Henry de Hastings seems to have enjoyed just over half of the dues as lord of the whole borough, perhaps suggesting that the king's burgesses were distinguished from others. There is not enough evidence to identify where they lived, but, given the links with Wigginton, it is tempting to locate them around the church in the Staffordshire portion of the borough.

So much for what can be broadly termed the king's interests in Tamworth. The earl must have had parallel rights before the Conquest, although they are difficult to identify since they had reverted to the crown by 1086. However, the absence of a manor of Tamworth in the later Middle Ages suggests that a substantial parcel of land within the borough had not come into the king's hands and so it is likely that the earl's hall was also located outside. In this context it is striking that the Tamworth burgesses who belonged to Earl Algar's manor of Drayton Bassett to the south of Tamworth are said to have 'worked there like the villans'. This could indicate that the hall was located there. Equally, though, any of the comital manors around the borough – Hopwas, Alrewas, Harlaston. Clifton Campville – could have performed the same function.

The evidence for the rights and properties of other parties is limited. No private courts or assizes of bread and ale have come to light to indicate the existence of liberties and sokes that characterized so many eleventh-century boroughs. Nevertheless, it is possible that some burgesses enjoyed such rights. In the thirteenth century there were twenty-four frankpledges in the town, twelve in each half. As heads of tithings, they were responsible for the presentment of crimes and misdemeanours and as such they performed much the same functions as the eleventh-century lawmen of Lincoln, Stamford, and York and the twenty-four aldermen of London. All of these officials held their own sokes and their Tamworth counterparts may have done likewise.

I have found no later traces of the burgesses who belonged to the manors of Coleshill and Drayton Bassett, but, if true to form, they would have rendered suit if court as well as services in their parent manors. Later documentation suggests the existence of two further estates in Tamworth of this kind. In 1275 John de Somerville held land in the borough in chief of the king which belonged to his manor of Alrewas and paid suit there. Subsequently, the property was described as a manor in Tamworth. Again, Perry Croft in Tamworth was held in chief of the king by a Nicholas son of Ralph in 1252 and is described as a sergeancy in 1291. The land has not been traced in detail, but it seems to have originally belonged to Amington. In both cases the relationship between the tenements and their parent manors was identical with the two examples recorded in

Domesday. If indeed ancient the one belonged to Earl Algar in 1066 and the other to Thorkell Battock if Amington is correctly identified in Domesday

There is no evidence in either Domesday Book or later documentation to suggest that Tamworth had any regional role like county boroughs. County farms and customs were levied through Stafford and Warwick as attested by the Pipe Rolls. Nor is there any way of determining the value of Tamworth in 1086, much less 1066. The nearest proxy for relative size is the aid given to the crown by the borough of Tamworth in the Pipe Roll of 1131. At a combined total of 55s it was just short of the 63s 8d rendered by Stafford – the figure for Warwick is not extant - perhaps suggesting that there were fewer burgesses than in the county town. However, in the same account Tamworth pleaded poverty in mitigation of non-payment of the previous aid and so the figure may not be a fair indicator of size.

Well, what can we make of all this? You may feel that from time to time I have over-stepped the mark in my speculation. I wouldn't necessarily disagree. I think, though, that we can draw some firm conclusions about Tamworth as a borough in the eleventh century. First, it is absolutely typical of major centres of power at this time in the aggregation of royal and comital manors in its vicinity. Our modern perception of a fundamental divide between town and country has a long history with roots in the middle ages. But it misrepresents the reality of early boroughs. Yes, they might be fortresses, markets, and administrative centres, but as such they were elements within a wider = I hesitate to use the term – landscape of lordship. As we have seen, Wigginton was an integral part of the complex as was Drayton where some of the burgesses rendered services. Such complexes are characteristic of many if not most English boroughs.

Where Tamworth deviates from the norm is in the absence of a high degree of tenurial heterogeneity. In most boroughs royal and comital estates are complemented by often large numbers of non-customary tenements which were constituted either as liberties or, more commonly, as appurtenances of rural manors. Such holdings are widely manifest in a proliferation of urban churches as each lord provided for the spiritual needs of his tenants and the demands of his own pocket. Tamworth was apparently not of this type: the existence of a single church signals the dominance of the king and earl. Jeremy Haslam has argued that this is a function of Tamworth's development, asserting that it was originally like any other borough, but rural lords abandoned their tenements for new ones in Stafford and Warwick when the area was shired in the tenth century. However, there is no evidence for such a development beyond the demands of his model.

We might, then, entertain the possibility that Tamworth had something of a different role or function from the 'normal' borough. Not all boroughs are equal. Some years ago I drew attention to the fact that Nottingham stood out among the Five Boroughs as the only one which lacked tenurial heterogeneity before the Conquest. Unlike Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, and Stamford, it too was apparently the exclusive reserve of the king and the earl. There was then and still is little in the archaeological record to suggest that Nottingham was truly urban much before 1100. However, massive pre-Conquest defences suggested it had a primary military role in the north Midlands. I tentatively concluded that it was the headquarters of the northern march that was the Five Boroughs of the late tenth century. The parallel with Tamworth is striking. Did it, too, have some regional role, here in the West Midlands, in the tenth century? I shall leave that question hanging.

I cannot reconstruct the Domesday account of Tamworth, had the GDB scribe ever got round to compiling it, in as much detail as I have done elsewhere for Winchester. But we can be sure that as regards the intramural area there would have been little more than a total for the number of burgesses or tenements that owed customs in 1066 and 1086, perhaps a record of those that were destroyed in the construction of the castle, a list of the non-customary tenements that belonged to Alrewas, Amington, Coleshill, Drayton, and Wigginton, and finally a value for both 1066 and 1086. As much would have easily fitted into the space left at the beginning of the Staffordshire folios. What would have been missing was the complex of lands to the east which we have suggested was also part of the borough. Do we see here a reason why the scribe did not enrol an account of Tamworth? Had he simply left insufficient space to enter it?

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