

THE ORIGINS OF DAVENHAM: SAXON ESTATE & PARISH?

The spire of St. Wilfred's church dominates the sky line and provides a landmark for those travelling between Chester and Manchester along the A556. The parish of Davenham (pronounced *Day'vnum*) in the very heart of Cheshire today includes the townships of Davenham, part of Leftwich, Eaton, Shipbrook, Newhall and Bostock. However the ancient parish covered a much greater area, nearly 9000 acres, and included townships which since the mid-nineteenth century are parishes in their own right. The ancient parish consisted of the townships of Bostock, Davenham, Eaton, Leftwich, Moulton, Newhall, part of Rudheath Lordship, Shipbrook, Shurlach, Stanthorne, Wharton and Whatcroft. Of these Newhall, Rudheath and parts of Whatcroft, about 2500 acres, were probably added during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a result of the gradual improvement of the wastelands of Rudheath.

The purpose of this article is to examine the early history and development of the parish, whether the parish was based upon a secular Anglo-Saxon estate, its links with the Norman barony of Shipbrook and to hopefully explain the anomaly as to why, prior to boundary reorganisations in 1936, the church at Davenham stood in the township of Leftwich.

Parish and Estate

In the days before the Norman Conquest Davenham was an ecclesiastical centre but when exactly the parish of Davenham was established is not known. Tradition has that St Wilfred himself founded the church on his journeys through these parts of Mercia in the late seventh century.¹ Certainly it was at some time between the mid-seventh century, when Christianity took a firm hold in what we now know as Cheshire, and 1086 when Domesday informs us that there was church and a priest here. The arrangement of the wider Anglo-Saxon church consisted of diocese and large minster parishes staffed by several priests. At this time Davenham lay within the diocese of Lichfield in the kingdom of Mercia, and is likely to have been a part of a large *parochia* based on Sandbach which along with that of Astbury together formed the administration unit known as the Domesday Hundred of Middlewich (later the Northwich Hundred).²

The extent of the parish suggests that this was once a large secular estate the antiquity of which may stretch back beyond the Saxon period. Most of the parish boundaries follow topographical features such as rivers and streams, suggestive of an ancient land unit. The western boundary of the early parish is well defined by the River Weaver and its northern boundary by the River Dane, once called the 'Daven'. The eastern boundary may have once followed the Dane continuously until, some time prior to the late eleventh century, additional lands on its eastern bank, at Shurlach, Shipbrook and Whatcroft, were added from the wasteland of Rudheath. The river is followed south until it reaches the confluence of the River Wheelock which is then followed forming a boundary with Newton, Middlewich. The southern boundary makes an irregular line up a stream and then across land to a clough which descends into the River Weaver.

At the lowest level of church organisation many small churches were established by local lords. These required a defined territory from which financial support might be gathered and to identify which people were its parishioners. Thus, these churches would be endowed with land and granted rights to collect taxes in the form of tithes from the townships and hamlets that comprised the lord's estate. The

¹ St Wilfred (b 634 - 709) Chief spokesman at the synod of Whitby in 664. He advocated Roman practices of Christianity whilst arguing against the Celtic monastic style. From 691 to 702 Wilfred was in Mercia as a bishop, either at Lichfield or Leicester. He was appointed bishop of York in 664 and lived in a monastery in Ripon until 669. He lived the latter part of his life in Mercia and became bishop of Hexham on his return in 705.

² Higham, N.J., *The Origins of Cheshire* (1993) p. 170

boundaries of parish and estate thus became fixed and more or less co-terminus: many of our ancient parishes may represent pre-Norman estates. Whilst the parish and lordship boundaries became sacrosanct the internal boundaries defining the townships where people lived were far more fluid.

The Saxon lord of this central Cheshire estate may well have established a church on his demesne lands and close to his residence, perhaps with the help and advice of St Wilfred, though it perhaps more likely to have been at some later time after the Saint's death. The establishment of a church was a mark of status. From a document dealing with laws and social rank, of uncertain date, possibly about the time of Alfred the Great, we learn that: "..... if a ceorl throve, so that he had fully five hides of his own land, church and kitchen, bellhouse and burh-gate seat, and special duty in the king's hall, then was he thenceforth of thegn-right worthy".³ Here then within the lordship of Davenham the lord built his church and diverted away from Sandbach the tithes of those who lived under his authority. The gradual decline of *parochiae* in favour of local parishes is a feature of the later Saxon period. It is likely that he built the church where it stands today for there is no evidence to suggest a change of location. The site, on a piece of elevated ground overlooking the river and above the flood plains, would present an ideal location dominating the surrounding countryside.

Within the territory of the lord's estate area there will have been several areas of settlement: hamlets and isolated agricultural sites. The accepted model of early Saxon village development starts with settlements being established along existing route ways or at the crossing point of two or more tracks. These would be identified by names based perhaps upon local topography: names which today scholars would identify as 'early' or 'primary' place-name types. Around each settlement, fields were laid out in which the local people had a number of allocated strips. As population increased so the fields were extended and beyond them secondary settlements were established on the wastelands and in the woodlands. These became recognised by names which we would term 'secondary' or 'late' place-names. The people of these subordinate settlements, as bondmen, would have owed allegiance and paid their dues and services to the lord at his hall in return for protection and patronage. The gradual granting of land to the lord's family members and followers resulted in the fragmentation of the original large estate unit into discreet smaller units or manors based on the 'new' settlement areas. The Saxon estate and parish based of Davenham certainly seems to accord with this model.

Present place-name research suggests Davenham's prominence in the area and that it was probably the earliest settlement. It takes its name from the river Dane which was originally known as 'Daven'. The river name is an ancient British (pre-Roman) one, 'Dauen' or 'Daan', related to the Middle Welsh *dafn*, meaning 'a trickling stream'. The second element *ham*, meaning a 'settlement' or 'village', is recognised by scholars as an earlier form than *ton* or *tune*, which means 'farmstead'. Thus we have 'the village or settlement by the Daven'. Also the *ham* place-name element suggests a place of status as the caput, the 'head-quarters', of a large estate as with Frodsham and Weaverham whose importance is evidenced by their being possessions of the Earls of Mercia for a considerable period of time and subsequently of the Norman earls of Chester.

The eventual division of the ancient Saxon unitary estate into several manors, perhaps explains the unique situation of Davenham Church being within the township of Leftwich. At the time the church was founded, Leftwich may not have been regarded as a separate entity, or else the township boundary defining Davenham and Leftwich along the Elderbriar Brook may not then have been established. Even if it was, the Saxon lord owned the whole territory and the location of his church in Leftwich would not have been of any real consequence. If the church was established after the formation of the discreet lordships or manors, then the evidence of Domesday would suggest that the principle lord, then Osmer, held both this half of Leftwich and Davenham. The Survey records the church under the Davenham heading but this only means it was an asset of the manor of Davenham –

³ Stubbs, W., *Select charters and other illustrations of English constitutional history from the earliest times to the reign of Edward*. (1895) p.65

it does not mean that it was located within the settlement of that name, rather it was the church of the 'lordship of Davenham'.

The establishment of the church in the territory later defined as Leftwich raises another question. Where did the Saxon lord have his residence – his hall? Where was the 'home base' which gave the lordship its name? A location in the heart of the present village seems unlikely given its position mid-way between the rivers Weaver and Dane. A high status site near to the church is more likely, though not much further east as this would encroach onto the flood plains of the river Dane. This would place the lord's hall in Leftwich and should that be the case it suggests that the original use of the name Davenham refers not to a specific settlement but to a collection of settlements along side the Dane – the lordship. One might speculate therefore, that following the establishment of the church, a hamlet then developed around the church which took its name from that of the church and the lordship. From the evidence of the Domesday Survey there is every likelihood that by the mid-11th century the 'headquarters' of the lordship was on the other side of the river in the area we now call Shipbrook. In pre-Conquest times this was the most valuable manor in the area (see later) and became the location of the Norman lord's 'castle'.

Today the centre of the village of Davenham is at the crossing of the road that links the two salt towns of Northwich and Middlewich, perhaps a very ancient route, with that of a track running across east-west. This latter route is perhaps more important than it first appears, for in Medieval times it linked Macclesfield and Chester, crossing the Weaver at Hartford. Mediaeval sources refer to parts of this route in Hulse and Lache Dennis as going to Macclesfield.⁴ Such a cross roads would attract trade and settlement and might have prompted a shift in the settlement focus away from the area of the church.

Whenever, and for whatever reasons, Davenham came into being it was later surrounded by several minor settlements, all bar three of which are listed in the Domesday Survey To the north lay *Wice* (Leftwich), a place-name that should not be confused with *-wich* meaning a place where salt was produced, though salt was found here at a later time. Here it may simply mean 'dairy farm' or 'dwelling place', though 'market place' cannot be ruled out. The later addition of 'Left' may refer to the Old English female name *Leoftæt*. To the south-west of Davenham lay *Moletune* (Moulton) which might mean Mula's farm, or 'farm providing mules, or else 'farm by the mill'. South along the River Weaver came *Wanetune* (Wharton, know in medieval times as 'Waverton juxta Middlewich' and 'Waverton juxta Bostock') - the meaning of which is obscure though one interpretation is 'farm at the waving tree' and I do not believe that 'Weaver ton' cannot be ruled out. To the east of Wharton lay *Botestoch* (Bostock) - Bota's hamlet. The *-stoc* element denotes a hamlet or secondary settlement, perhaps one that was fenced by tree stumps, hence the word 'stockade', or else land felled of timber and cleared of its tree stumps. On the banks of the River Dane, opposite Davenham lay *Sibroch* (Shipbrook), which is said to mean the 'stream where sheep were washed', however ; To the north of Shipbrook lay *Survelec* (representing we may presume Higher and Lower Shurlach and Bradford) - the 'muddy stream'. The township s which do not feature in the Survey are: *Eyton* (Eaton) - the 'farm by the river' from *ea* meaning river, or else 'farm in the woodland' from a corruption of *lea*; *Stanthirle* (Stanthorne) - which was anciently *Stanthirle* means the 'stone passage' which was probably a township formed from parts of Bostock and Wharton; and *Watecrofte* (Whatcroft) - the 'croft where wheat was grown' - originally a part of Shipbrook. Shurlach, Shipbrook, Whatcroft and Stanthorne are all minor place-names of a purely topographical nature which probably refer to isolated settlements at those locations. The origin of the name Stanthorne is particularly interesting. It has been suggested that a Roman Road linked Chester with the fort on Kings Street, Middlewich and that this route forked away from Watling Street just east of Kelsall, headed straight for Over Church, crossed the River Weaver, and then headed for Middlewich. Were the remains of the old metalled road the origin of the place-name *Stanthirle* - the stony way?

⁴ Tait, James (ed.), *The Chartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester*, part II, Chetham Society, vol, 82 (1923) p. 398

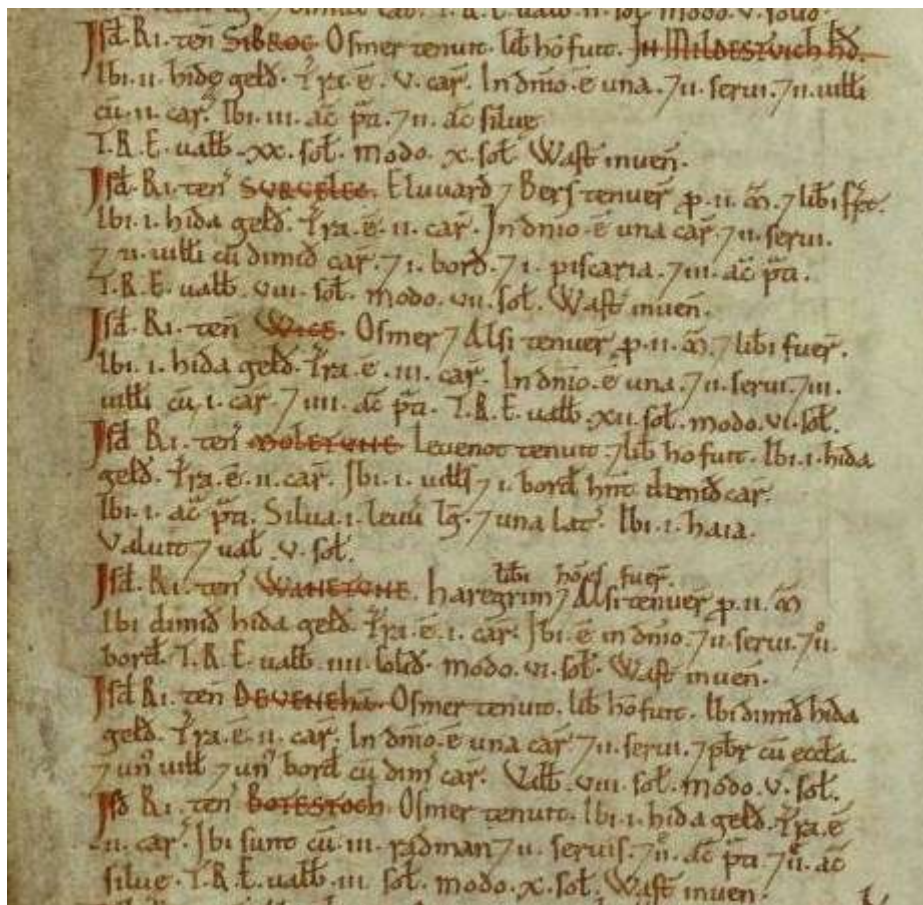


Figure One: The Domesday Book folio detailing townships in Davenham parish

Davenham Parish in the Domesday Survey

Of the seven manors listed in Domesday that were contained within the area of the ancient parish, four were held just prior to the Conquest by a Saxon named Osmer. This personal name is not a particularly common one though it is found in Domesday entries for Derbyshire, Somerset, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. In South Cheshire he also held the manor of Crewe, the valuable manor of Audlem, half of 'Austereston' (near Nantwich), part of Wistaston (near Crewe) and 'Frith' (near Wrenbury). Osmer also held the valuable manor of Claverton near Chester which might be considered as his most valuable holding with a good deal of agricultural land, eight burgage properties in the city of Chester, another two burgages across the river in Handbridge and a salt house in *Norwich*. Lordship over a number of contiguous manors in the heart of the county, extensive and valuable property holdings elsewhere, commercial connections in both the city and Northwich, and the possession of a church suggest a man of high status, perhaps with the rank of *thegn*.

Osmer's manors in mid-Cheshire were *Deveneham*, *Botestoch*, *Sibroc* and one of the two named *Wice* (probably the south-east corner of modern Leftwich where the church stands). Of the other Domesday manors within the parish, Alfsi held the other *Wice* manor; Alfward and Bersi held the two manors named *Survelec*; Leofnoth held *Moletune*; and Arngrim and Alfsi (perhaps the same man at Leftwich) held the two manors called *Wanetune*. Although not named directly as lord of the other three and a half manors he may have been recognised as the 'overlord'.

In the Domesday Survey there is no mention of Eaton which lies due west of Davenham. There are perhaps three reasons for this: first the area may be part of one of the two manors named as *Wice*; it may have been a part of Davenham; or a part of Moulton. Likewise there is no mention of Stanthorne which at this time may have been wasteland and a part of the manor of Bostock; this was the case

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throughout the medieval period and in fact the old moated site of Bostock Hall lay within what is now the modern township of Stanthorne. Whatcroft was at this time either part of Shipbrook or else a wasteland and part of Rudheath then yet to be improved.

It is probable that the whole of this area was regarded as a single unit, a large Saxon estate, owned by a single lord and his family as discussed earlier. Over the centuries prior to 1066 some division of the estate took place due to gifts to a lord's younger sons, or by transfer with daughters as marriage portions, or as grants to a lord's friends and companions. If so then it is perhaps no coincidence that this large estate was recreated by Osmer's Norman successors as the Barony of Shipbrook.

A similar situation may be observed at Dunham where Alward,⁵ held contiguous manors and a church at Bowden that became the nucleus of the Norman Barony of Dunham Massey. The remnants of old Saxon estates that became Norman baronies may also be conjectured at Malpas and Halton though without identifying a compact block held by a Saxon lord in quite the same way.

⁵ He may be the same man who held half of Shurlach in Davenham parish

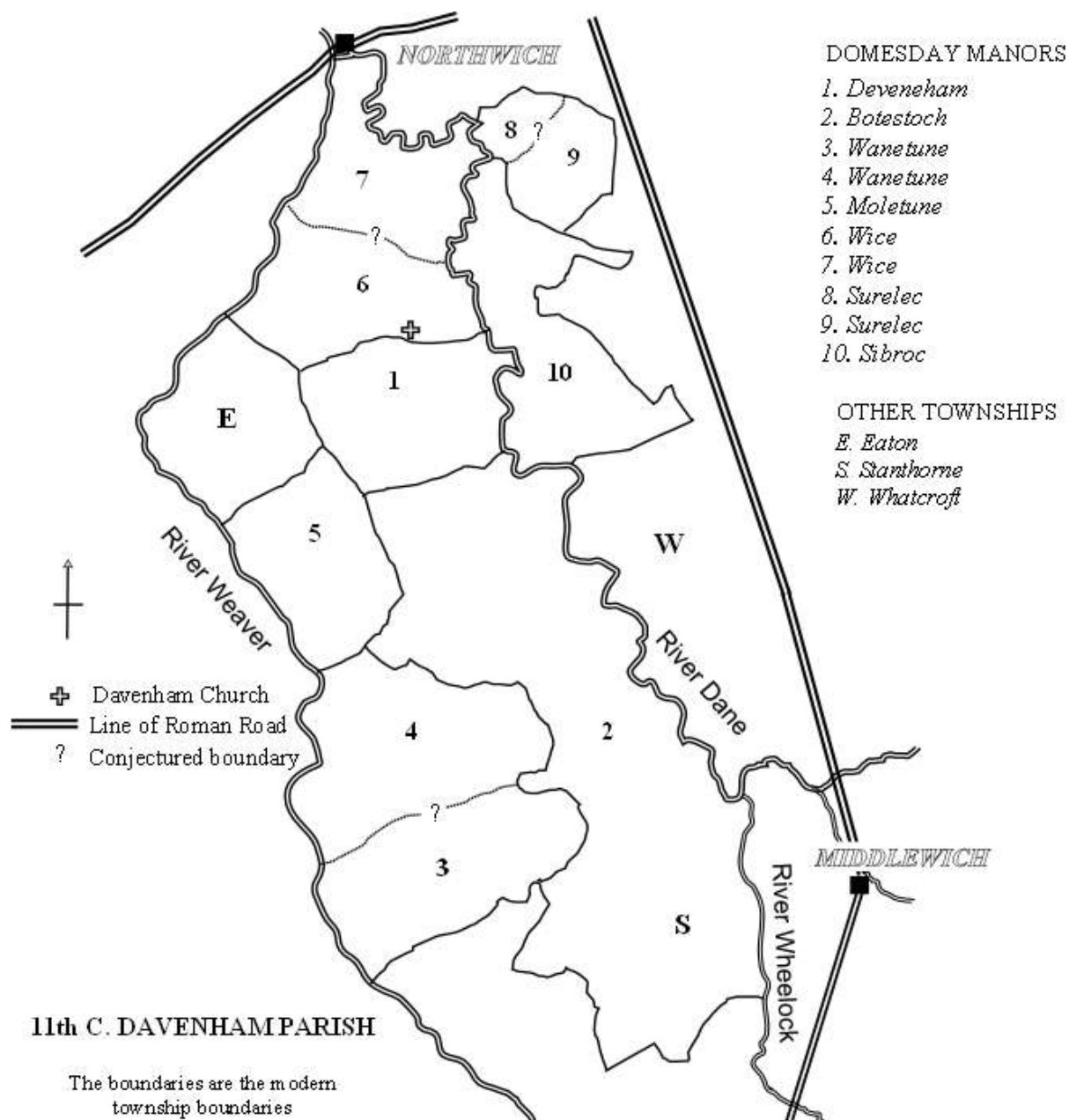


Figure Two: The Domesday Manors within Davenham parish

Landscape

What then can the Domesday Book offer as evidence of the nature of the landscape and its use in the parish during the late eleventh century?

Domesday entries inform us as to the extent of the manors in terms of so many hides, a unit of landed resources used for taxation purposes. According to Bede, the hide was the land of one family, presumably a free, tax-paying family and its dependants. The problem with unit is that it is an assessment for taxation purposes rather than a land measure and dependent on a number of factors including the area and quality of available land. The late Anglo-Saxon tax system was based on units of five hides to a manor and such units, or combinations of these are indicative of early territories.⁶ In all there were seven hides in the parish. Shipbrook had the highest assessment at two hides suggesting its importance in the pre-Conquest parish. On the other hand Davenham is only assessed at half a hide which might be as a result of some tax exemption due owing to the presence of the church here. The two manors named Wharton are also assessed together at half a hide and yet their overall description would suggest a single hide. If Wharton had been a single hide that leads to an interesting hypothesis that the original Davenham estate was a standard five hide unit. For if we assume that both Davenham and Wharton were originally valued at a single hide then with Bostock, Moulton and Leftwich the total number of hides on the west side of the river is five. Shipbrook and Shurlach, which both lie on the east side of the Dane, may originally have been parcels of land that were improved and added to the parish and estate at a later date. Possession of five hides and a church were said at an earlier period to be the mark of the gentry status. This perhaps suggests that Osmer was of such rank or that his predecessors were.

The next assessment is the *carucata* a term which is derived from the Latin for a 'plough' and hence 'ploughland' which is the amount of land a team of oxen could plough in a year. The system of open field farming, with its characteristic fields, furlongs, flats and selions, which persisted throughout the medieval period, was introduced by the Saxons around the eighth or ninth centuries. But Domesday only informs us of the total available land for ploughing and the amount actually under the plough

Not surprisingly given the number of hides, Shipbrook seems to have had the largest available land for arable purposes with five ploughlands. Trying to equate this to modern areal measure is fraught with problems and would depend upon soil density and the overall terrain. Figures of between forty and 120 modern acres have been suggested and if a figure of about eighty may be assumed we have 400 acres of potential arable land. Domesday elaborates on this with a statement as to how much land was actually under the plough and whether or not this was for the direct benefit of the lord. At Shipbrook there was one ploughland in the lord's demesne with a further two ploughlands with the serfs and villains. This suggests that in 1086 there were around 160 acres of unproductive land. This fact seems to be reflected in the valuations given at the end of the paragraph which states that in the time of King Edward the Confessor the manor had been worth twenty shillings a year and that it had been 'waste' and worth nothing in 1068, though it recovered somewhat to a value of ten shillings by 1086. On the other hand the manor of Bostock with its two ploughlands was being worked to its full capacity and its value had increased three-fold between 1066 and 1086. Similarly neighbouring Wharton with a single ploughland was worked to the full and had an increased valuation. Elsewhere there was under-achievement and a consequent reduction in valuation. Moulton is somewhat different in that it maintained its valuation despite only a quarter of its arable being worked and this may be due to the extensive area of woodland contained within its boundaries.

Woodland, used for timber, brushwood and pasturing swine, was a valuable commodity. On only three manors does this feature occur and in two of them, Shipbrook and Bostock, the areas are very small with only two acres in each. However at Moulton we are informed the wood was a league in length and the same in breadth. Given that a league is normally said to be the equivalent to 1½ miles then this woodland would cover the entire township of Moulton as we know it today and beyond. The

⁶ B.E. Harris and A.T. Thacker (eds.), *The Victoria County of Cheshire*, vol. I (1987), p.264

likelihood is that the measurement was purely an estimation and may be somewhat exaggerated, nevertheless the amount of wood is significant. The areas we now know as Adam's Heath, lying between Moulton and Bostock, and Mere Heath in Davenham township, may have been cleared from part of this ancient woodland. Within the woodland at Moulton there was a *haia* - a hedged or fenced enclosure which would have been used for impounding wild animals. In the nineteenth century there were fields named 'Little Heys' and 'Big Heys' which may well allude to the location of this ancient enclosure. Similarly in Moulton and Bostock there are references to nineteenth century fields with the word 'wood' within the name. The large area of woodland in Moulton may have stretched north to cover the area we now know as Eaton. If the origin of this name is a corruption of *Lea-ton* this would mean a 'farm in a woodland clearing' and suggest that Eaton was a part of Moulton. The name Bostock suggests that there had been an area of woodland there.

Meadow is found alongside the rivers in Shipbrook, Bostock, Moulton and Shurlach. At Shurlach we are also informed that there was a fishery - a valuable asset which no doubt contributed to this dual manor's overall value. Interestingly there is no record of any meadow at Leftwich though one would have expected large areas of meadow down by either of the two rivers, especially in the north of the township. Likewise at Wharton there is no mention of any meadow.

Population

The next aspect of the Domesday entries is the recorded population. The highest number of people were the 'serfs' (*servi*), of whom there were twelve in all, nearly 50% of the total number as compared with 11% in the whole of Cheshire. The term 'serf' refers to someone who was bound to serve his lord and required to perform labour services for him on a regular basis; an individual who had no land of his own and who was regarded as part of the property of the manor - a chattel.

Next in number and rank are the villains (*villani*) who were again unfree and part of the manorial assets, but they did hold a small amount of land, which they could cultivate for themselves, with some rights to the manorial assets in return for labour service to the lord. There are five of these in the parish about 19% compared to 36% in the county.

Bordars (*bordarii*) were effectively small-holders who had a little more freedom than the villains and of these there were again five: 19% against 30%. Higham has suggested that the *bordarii* were individuals who held small-holdings near to the boundaries on previously uncultivated land bringing into use for their lord former woodland or heath.⁷ Here in the parish this would seem to be the case. At Davenham there was a bordar who may have resided in the area now known as Mere Heath. Here then there may have been some activity to clear woodland, which at some time or another was abandoned and returned to the wild as heath land. At Moulton there was an extensive area of woodland and such an individual may have assarted (brought into cultivation) lands there. At Wharton there are two bordars, presumably one on each of the two manors of this name, and these may have occupied the moss to the east which bordered Stanthorne and indeed may have included what became the hamlet of Stanthorne. At Shurlach there was another bordar and he may have occupied the area later known as Bradford. This hamlet was not, as some might suppose, down on the River Weaver but rather to the east of the manor on the boundary with Rudheath where the Roman Road (King Street) crossed boggy terrain.

Next we have radmen who were free from the manorial ties, and who in return for providing their lord with services on horseback, such as escort duties, received their own tenements. There were three radmen all of whom lived on the Bostock manor and who represent a higher proportion than is found in the county: 11% against 7%. One of these unnamed individuals may be the ancestor of those who assumed for themselves this local appellation and became lords of the manor. Lastly, we have an individual who was the priest, one of only thirty-two recorded in the whole of the shire.

⁷ Higham, p.206

In all, besides the lord, we have twenty-six individuals recorded. Each of these, perhaps including the priest, we may presume had a family thus giving a population of about 100. Add to this the lord with his family and household the population of the parish may have been as high as 150.

Valuations

The value of each manor prior to the Conquest totalled sixty shillings of which Shipbrook accounted for a third of this. No values are given at the time the Normans took possession, which is normally given as 1070, though four of them are declared as being 'waste'. This term has often been defined as meaning 'deliberately laid waste' by the incoming Normans during their punitive raids of the winter 1069/70, however more recent opinion gives a less harsh interpretation.⁸ It is suggested that the term means simply 'unproductive' as regards profit for the lord. Within the parish the manors so described are Shipbrook, Bostock, Wharton and Shurlach.

By 1086 there had been some recovery of values. At Bostock the valuation was treble that of the pre-Conquest era which may have been achieved through the presence of the three radmen who with more land and freedom than villeins were able to exploit their holdings. There had also been a significant recovery at Wharton where the presence of bordars improving the waste on the margins of the township contributed to this. Shipbrook, however, had only managed to achieve 50% of its original value. This would suggest a significant loss between 1066 and 1070 and perhaps, being the *caput* of the Davenham lordship, had suffered at the hands of the Normans in the 'traditional' way.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the ancient parish of Davenham constituted a coherent geographical unit within which there were several settlements. Each of these would have provided sufficient resources to maintain the self-sufficiency of a lord, his family and those bound to him. Whatever secular administrative arrangements were initially in place these, with the coming of Christianity, were paralleled with ecclesiastical ones.

There can be little doubt of the importance and value of this estate in the very heart of the county with its links to trade in the City and the salt industry in Northwich, and perhaps Middlewich too. Likewise the importance therefore of its lord, Osmer and his antecessors.

Richard Vernon's honour in Middlewich hundred, which became recognised as the barony of Shipbrook, being based on the territory of Davenham parish and the associated lordship certainly suggests continuity of local administrative processes and would have led to little upheaval. Despite divisions of land and property and eventual reversals of these down the centuries, the barony and its estates remained much as it had always been until the late nineteenth century.

⁸ *VCH*, I, p.336; Matthews, S. 'William the Conqueror's Campaign in Cheshire in 1069-70: Ravaging and Resistance in the North-West', *Northern History*, x1 (2003).

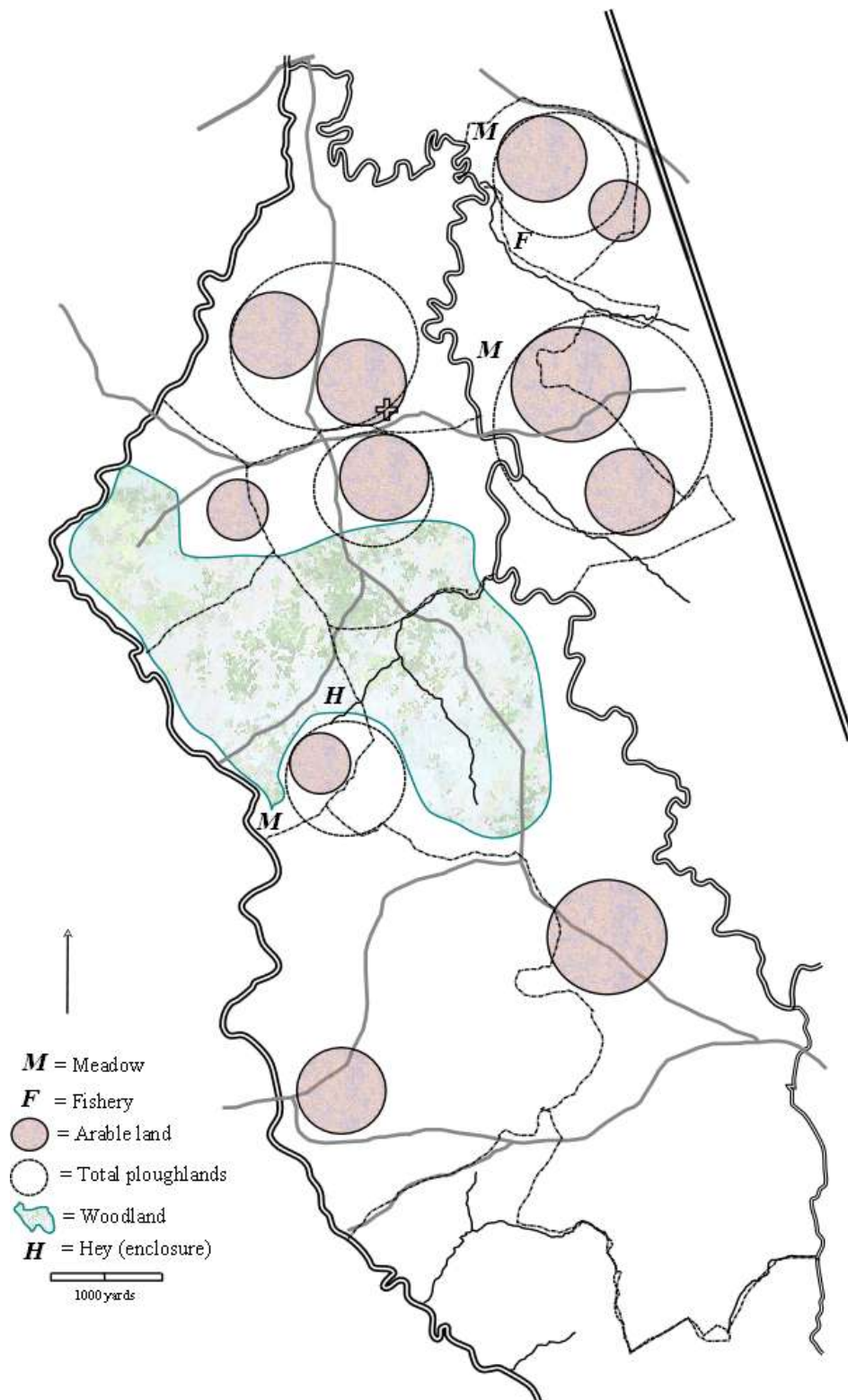


Figure Three: Conjectured model of landscape features in Davenham parish

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	Hides	Assessment of Ploughlands	Demesne ploughlands	Other ploughlands	Serfs	Villeins	Bordars	Radmen	Meadow (acres)	Woodland (acres)	Values in shillings			
											TRE	1068	1086	
Davenham	½	2	1	½	2	1	1				8		5	Church & priest
Shipbrook	2	5	1	2	2	2			3	2	20	waste	10	
Bostock	1	2		2	2			3	2	2	3	waste	10	
Moulton	1	2		½		1	1		1	*	5		5	* 1 league x 1 league - enclosure
Wharton	½	1		1	2		2				4	waste	6	
Wharton														
Leftwich	1	3	1	1	2	3					12		6	
Leftwich														
Shurlach	1	2	1	½	2	2	1		3		8	waste	7	fishery
Shurlach														
TOTALS	7	17	4	7½	12	5	5	3	9	4	60		49	

