Stamford and the Norman Conquest

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The impact of the Norman Conquest on the fabric of English society is a perennial problem of medieval studies. After a hundred years of rigorous research, there is still no general agreement on the extent to which the Normans adopted the English institutions they found or introduced radically new concepts in the organisation of society. In the field of urban studies, however, some degree of consensus has emerged. After Tait’s crushing rejoinder to Stephenson’s thesis in Borough and Town, no one seriously holds the view that the Conquest was the decisive stimulus to urbanisation in England. Subsequent research, both historical and archaeological, has fully demonstrated the vigorous growth of urban life in the late Anglo-Saxon period. But this is not to say that the Normans did not have a profound effect on towns. The administrative, strategic and economic importance of the Anglo-Saxon boroughs was as great for them as it was for their predecessors and inevitably they moulded them to their specific needs and requirements.

The most immediate and manifest change was occasioned by the advent of the castle. This military concept, introduced wholesale into England for the first time, was of paramount importance to the Norman strategy. As a minority in a potentially hostile environment, the conquerors could secure a centre of population and the surrounding area by means of erecting a motte and bailey garrisoned by a small number of mounted soldiers. The castle was at once a stronghold and a symbol of the new regime. They therefore had few scruples in destroying existing structures within towns in order to command the best strategic positions. The needs of the new institution in its turn stimulated other innovations. At Norwich, Northampton and Nottingham, for example, market places were set up at the castle gates and French boroughs developed around them to take advantage of the new economic opportunities offered as much as to supply the garrisons. Such developments radically changed the face of many towns and exerted subtle pressures on their administrative structures. In this article it is not possible to examine all of the ramifications of the Norman Conquest and its impact on the town of Stamford. Our aim is somewhat more limited. We shall review the evidence for the construction of the castle and the associated changes which accompanied it in the years immediately after the Conquest.

In 1066 the town already had a long history. The settlement exploded into significance in the late 9th and early 10th centuries as a Danish industrial, trading and military centre. Its importance for the Vikings is not difficult to perceive. With the uplands of Rutland to the west and the fenland to the east, Stamford controlled an important river crossing on the road which linked the Danish strongholds in

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**Fig. 1 Stamford and the Norman Conquest, (D. Longley)**
East Anglia and the North and dominated the topographically discrete regions of Kesteven and Holland. These characteristics must have weighed heavily. After 910 the main threat to Danish hegemony came from Wessex and an army at Stamford became thus entrenched to hold the territory between the Welland and the Witham. It is not surprising, then, that the town was the administrative centre for this area in the early 10th century. Towards the end of the century, however, circumstances began to change. In 942 the Danes at Stamford, Lincoln, Leicester, Nottingham and Derby were liberated by King Edmund from subjection to the heathen Norsemen based at York. Subsequently, in alliance with Wessex, the Five Boroughs were organised as a confederacy designed to form a screen of identity in the settlers of the East Midlands and to thereby isolate and contain an unstable and potentially hostile North. Thus, as the attention of national politics increasingly focused upon the Humber, Stamford began to lose its primary importance as a military centre. By the early 11th century its strategic role had been entirely eclipsed by Lincoln and its wider administrative functions had passed to that city by the time Lincolnshire had come into being. However, despite its secondary role in a national context, the town probably continued to prosper. From the beginning it had been an important industrial centre with iron-working, pottery production and possibly the manufacture of cloth, and by 1066 was a trading centre of some importance.²

Probably the first and most immediate effect of the Conquest was the re-emergence of Stamford’s military role. We have no notice of the existence of the castle until 1086, but it seems likely that its construction was part of a concerted policy of castle building associated with the imposition of Norman rule into the North. By 1067 government through the Anglo-Saxon administration had proved ineffective and rebellion had broken out. King William therefore determined upon a policy of direct Norman rule. Orderic Vitalis reports that the campaign started in the Spring of 1068. The king built castles at Warwick and Nottingham and then went on to York, the centre of resistance, where he built two more castles. On his return to the south, he consolidated his position by building castles at Lincoln, Huntingdon and Cambridge. This account suggests that William’s strategy was twofold: firstly, to hold important centres of population and, secondly, to secure the routes to the North. No mention is made of Stamford, although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that castles were built both at Lincoln and in this district. But in the context of this strategy we might expect the town to have been fortified at this time. In terms of communications its importance was as great as it had ever been in the late 9th century and certainly by 1070 the Normans considered the town safe. In that year Turold, the new abbot of Peterborough, took refuge there with 160 knights while Hereward the Saxon plundered his abbey.⁵

The physical impact of the castle on the town is difficult to determine. The site, between the present Sheep Market and the mill stream, was well chosen. Situated on a knoll which needed little artificial heightening to make it defensible, it dominated the approaches to the town from the west, an ancient river crossing on the line of Castle Dyke to the south and the Anglo-Danish borough to the east (Fig. 1). It has been claimed that the site was peripheral to the settlement itself on the grounds that, unlike Lincoln or York, relatively few houses were destroyed when the castle was built. It is recorded in Domesday book that:—

In these five wards there were in 1066 141 mansones and half a mill, which used to render all customs. And also there are as many now (i.e. in 1086) except five which are waste on account of the work of the castle.⁶

Superficially, this passage does appear to record the number of structures destroyed. But it cannot be so simply interpreted. Firstly, the term mansio may have a primarily legal meaning for, frequently contrasted with domus, house, it refers to something more than an individual physical structure. Secondly, wastage, waste, is itself a technical term with the essential meaning of loss of revenue rather than the destruction of a tenement. Thirdly, the passage only refers to the wastage of those mansones which had formerly paid custom, that is, rents and dues, to the king. Thus, in recording that five mansiones were waste on account of the work of the castle, the Domesday Book commissioners were not recording the destruction of five buildings, but the loss of revenue which had been owed to the king from five ill-defined entities. Clearly, this is not good evidence for the extent of development on the site before the Conquest. It is true that the excavation of the castle bailey did not reveal extensive early occupation. But much of the area had been disturbed by Saxo-Norman quarrying.⁷ However, as we shall see, the castle was built close to, if not within, a large non-custom paying estate. Therefore, many structures may have been destroyed but have gone unrecorded since they did not contribute to the customs of the town.

Whatever its physical impact, it has been suggested that the construction of the castle was the occasion for more important and far-reaching changes in the town than the destruction of a few tenements. The discussion has centred on an anomalous entry which follows the account of the king’s manor of Great Casterton in the Northamptonshire Domesday:—

The king has in the demesne of Portland 2 carucates and 2 parts of a third carucate and 12 acres of meadow. 1 carucate of land belongs to the church of St Peter and ½ carucate to the church of All Saints. Portland with its meadow paid 48 shillings before 1066 and 10 shillings for the horse-cloths of the king’s packhorses. In addition the king ought to have 9 pounds and 12 shillings from the other issues of the borough.⁸

Portland does not appear in Northamptonshire records after 1086, but the name means ‘land pertaining to a market’ and, in the present context, must refer to a borough. In the past, historians have considered the possibility that the borough in question was Northampton or Peterborough. But all have rejected both identifications in favour of Stamford. Portland is nowhere in this chart. Portland was assed in carucates, the unit of assessment north of the Welland, and therefore cannot easily refer to a settlement in hided Northamptonshire. Moreover, an examination of the Domesday Book text shows that the entry is grouped with the estates to the west of Stamford which were subsequently incorporated into the new county of Rutland in the 12th century.⁹ Portland, then, is quite clearly located in the neighbourhood of the town and must have derived its name from its relationship with the borough.

If related to Stamford, it is very strange that Portland does not appear in the Lincolnshire Domesday where the borough is described at length.¹¹ This difficulty has been explained as a function of the status of the land and the use that the Normans made of it. It is argued that it was part of the king’s manor of Great Casterton which at that time encompassed what is now part of the borough of Stamford. After the Conquest a market was set up there and the churches of St Peter and All Saints built. Their sites, therefore, indicate that Portland was situated in the vicinity of Red Lion’s Square and the Sheep Market. It is tentatively concluded that the whole complex was a Norman innovation associated with the construction of the castle. Only subsequently was this new borough absorbed into the
territory of Stamford. There are a number of difficulties in this analysis. Firstly, there is no implicit or explicit relationship between Portland and Great Casterton. The Domesday Book description certainly appears to run on from the preceding entry, but this is merely a function of compression for it is a later addition to the text. The scribe, aware of the need to enrol Portland at this point, left a space for it, but, in the event, it proved to be too small and he subsequently had to squeeze the entry in as best he could. On the contrary, the diplomatic of the text indicates a separate estate. Thus, the statement 'The king has in the demesne of Portland 2 carucates . . . ' is remarkably close to the formula used in the description of the more important estates in the Northamptonshire Domesday. By way of contrast, subsidiary holdings are introduced by the formula 'To this manor belong these members. In x there are y hides . . . '. The record of a value points to the same conclusion. Secondly, the entry does not record that the churches of St Peter and All Saints were located in Portland. It merely states that they held land there. The formula used to express the relationship is the one normally used when an estate in one settlement holds land in another. It is, therefore, more likely that the two churches were not located in Portland. Indeed, this conclusion is consonant with the Domesday Book account of Stamford which suggests that St Peter's, at least, was situated in the town in 1086. Thirdly, Portland evidently had an identity in 1066 for it is given a value of 48 shillings at that time. It cannot, therefore, have been created by the Normans.

The Portland entry, then, does not provide any evidence for a new Norman market or borough in the vicinity of the churches of All Saints and St Peter. Its peculiarities nevertheless indicate some radical reorganisation of territory in Stamford: it is difficult to see how there can have been any ancient relationship between a carucated estate and hidated Northamptonshire. This may have been of recent occurrence. The later insertion of the entry, along with its distinctive assessment, suggests that the Domesday scribe had to consult another return for the information, that it had not been collected through the jury of Witchley Hundred in which Great Casterton was situated. The Domesday Book description of the borough of Stamford suggests that such a reorganisation had taken place in the town itself between 1066 and 1086.

In 1066 Stamford was divided into six wards, five in Lincolnshire and the sixth across the bridge in Northamptonshire. There were at least 283 mansions. But the total number must have been considerably greater: there were 128½ in 1086 for which no pre-Conquest details are given and there is no apparent record of the number in Stamford Baron. Not all of these tenements were of a similar status. 170, which 'used to render all customs', were part of the borough proper. Some were subject to the lawmen, while others were attached to manors in the surrounding countryside. For example, the nine mansions that Lewin held passed to Alfred of Lincoln and rendered dues to his manor in Uffington. One group of tenements, however, is entirely different from all the others:

Queen Edith had (i.e. in 1066) 70 mansions which belonged to Roteland, with all customs except those touching bread. To these there belong 2½ carucates of land, and 1 ploughing team, and 45 acres of meadow outside the vil. Now King William holds, and it is worth

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**Fig. 2 Stamford: the Saxo-Norman town. (D. Longley)**
6 pounds. In 1066 it was worth 4 pounds.14 This was by far the largest single holding in the town, comprising one fifth of all the recorded tenements and five-sixths of the taxed land. Under earlier estates, it was not attached to a rural manor but belonged to Roteland. Formerly this ‘multiple’ estate, consisting of a number of manors, had probably encompassed the whole area of the later county of Rutland, but sometime between 894 and 917 the hundred of Witchley, its eastern portion immediately to the west of Stamford, was appended to Northamptonshire. It was only subsequently reunited in the 12th century.15 Queen Edith’s fee was attached to the western chin, centred solely on Oakham, Rutland, and called Roteland to distinguish it from the later county. The record of a value for the holding, an unusual feature for an urban tenement in the Northern Danelaw, clearly shows that it constituted a manor within this multiple estate. Queen Edith’s title was apparently derived from her title to Roteland as a whole and the status of the holding must have been similar to that of any other manor within the estate.

The church of St Peter, the site of which is adjacent to the present bus station, gives some idea of its location within the town for it was almost certainly the church of the manor. The site of Albert of Lotharingia, the tenant of the church, centred solely on the town of Oakham, Rutland. Thus, just as his church of Oakham was the church of the queen’s manor there, St Peter’s was probably the church of her manor in Stamford. Its site, therefore, gives some idea of the location of the manor; it may in fact mark its nucleus since churches and manorial halls are usually closely associated. Moreover, the extent of its parish, although difficult to identify precisely, suggests that the manor encompassed much of the west of the town and a considerable share in its fields. Thus, in 1066 the area around St Peter’s church, and a large part of the later territory of Stamford, was not an integral part of the borough as a legal entity, but belonged to the estate of Roteland. The borough itself was located further to the east and was centred on Broad street, High Street and St Mary’s Street (Fig. 2). This was the site of the Danish borough of the early 10th century. However, by 1066 it had expanded beyond the bounds of the original nucleus. There was a settlement on the south bank of the river which owed its existence to the burh built by Edward the Exile in 918. To the north-west the church of St Clement was already in existence, suggesting settlement on Scogtate. There was probably also development in the vicinity of St Paul’s Street to the east, for the unnamed church held by Pastol in Domesday Book was probably Holy Trinity.17 The relationship between these two nuclei remains obscure. Queen Edith’s manor is certainly an early feature of the town. Its association with Roteland must imply that it was in existence in some form before Witchley Hundred was appended to Northamptonshire. The Danish borough was administratively associated with Kesteven and Holland, and later Lincolnshire, and appears to have developed independently alongside it. Despite the different administrative contexts of the two nuclei, however, there may have been a close relationship between them. It is not unknown for other Anglo-Saxon boroughs to be associated with royal estates in this way and we might expect the town to have been one community.18

By 1086 the peculiarities of administration in Stamford had been rationalised. Queen Edith’s fee is not described in the Roteland Domesday but appears in the account of the king’s borough of Stamford in Lincolnshire. The text implicitly recognises a radical change of status for it records that the 70 manor of Roteland. This is an unusual formula: the statement of such relationships are usually expressed in the present tense. In this entry, then, we are justified in understanding ‘belonged’ as ‘used to belong’ and concluding that the estate had been transferred from Roteland to Stamford sometime between 1066 and 1086. This conclusion is consistent with the later administrative history of the town. It is true that in the Middle Ages part of the territory of Stamford was in the county of Rutland, but this apparently did not include the area around St Peter’s church. The west field of the town, significantly called Sundersoken, ‘estate apart’, and the hamlet of Bradcroft within it, are consistently said to be in Rutland. The 12th-century bounds of the area seem to be substantially those of the Ketterton Field of the 19th century, that is, Stamford west of Ermine Street. There is no incontrovertible evidence to demonstrate the eastern boundary of the county, but it was almost certainly the Roman road. No other part of the town is said to lie in Rutland and, according to Stukeley, Ermine Street marked the boundary between Stamford and its hamlet of Bradcroft. Furthermore, there is evidence to show that, in the late 14th century, the escheator of Lincolnshire acted in his official capacity as far west as the Austin Friary which abuts on the eastern side of that line.19 Stamford in Rutland, then, was situated to the west of the suggested nucleus of Queen Edith’s estate and was almost certainly continued to Bradcroft and the west field of the town. We can now see that this area must be represented by Portland in 1086. Grouped with Witchley Hundred in Domesday Book which was incorporated into Rutland in the 12th century, it must be identical with that part of Stamford which was in the new county in the 13th and 14th centuries. The rest of the town north of the river was administratively in Lincolnshire throughout the Middle Ages.

The radical changes of the reign of the Conqueror, then, would seem to have defined the administrative boundaries of the medieval period. It is probably from this time that the territory of Stamford substantially assumed the form that we are familiar with. There is, of course, no unequivocal evidence to indicate the reason for such a reorganisation. But it is not difficult to see why the Normans may have found it desirable. If the church of St Peter marks the nucleus of Queen Edith’s fee, then the castle immediately to the east was built in a manor which was administratively part of Roteland. The Normans must have found this inconvenient. The whole estate at this time was administered from Nottingham, yet the strategic context of the castle was Lincolnshire. It was clearly desirable to bring it into the administration of the area it was designed to hold. It seems very likely, then, that the anomalies of the administrative geography of Stamford were rationalised in order to bring the castle into the control of Lincoln.

It is now impossible to determine with any certainty whether the anomalous position of Portland was in some way associated with this reorganisation. We have already argued that the holding cannot be an integral part of Witchley Hundred and must have been appurtenant to Stamford sometime before 1086. However, in the 12th and 13th centuries the area had a pronounced agricultural character notably the use of the bovate as the unit of tenure and, although the church of St Peter had glebe land there, much of it seems to have been worked from the surrounding villages of Great Casterton, Inghthree, Tinwell and Ketton.20 Moreover, its status in 1086 suggests that it cannot have been an integral part of the borough itself. It is said to be royal demesne but this is unlikely to imply customary land. If so, it would have been enrolled in the Domesday Book account of the town in much the same way as the custom-paying sixth ward of the town which was also in Northamptonshire. It seems more likely that it implies tenna regis, that is, land over which the king had a proprietary right. As
such, it would have been similar in status to Queen Edith's 70 mansiones which were also held by the king in 1086. If Portland was associated with any fee in the town, then, it can only have been this estate. Indeed, its assessment of 2 carucates and 2 parts of a third carucate, implies a three carucate unit and it may well duplicate part of the combined assessment of three carucates of the queen's fee and St Peter's church. In conclusion, it can be tentatively suggested that Portland had been the agricultural element in Queen Edith's manor which was loosely appended to the nearest royal manor, either Great Casterton or Ketton, for economic exploitation when the urban part of the fee was absorbed into the borough.

The administrative reorganisations of the reign of the Conqueror cast much light on the later history of the town. In 1156 Stamford was granted by Henry II to Richard Hamet and, with the exception of a few years in the middle 13th century, it became a seigneurial borough. The apparent ease with which this transformation was made was probably directly related to the large demesne that the crown acquired and incorporated into the town after the Conquest. But, despite the feudal terminology of the 13th and 14th centuries, the community of the borough survived and indeed flourished. The manor and town of Stamford were never completely integrated, for throughout the Middle Ages a careful distinction was consistently made between the two. It is true that the court of the castle was apparently the court of Stamford, but the complaints of administrative abuse recorded in the account of Stamford in the Hundred Rolls of 1275 show that the burgesses were aware of the different roles of this court and were jealous of their rights. Moreover, in the 13th century the officials of the town, with the possible exception of the lord's seneschal, were usually taken from the ranks of the richer merchants and indeed from 1242 to c.1260 the burgesses seem to have been directly responsible to the crown for their own affairs. This suggests some degree of self-determination, and it seems likely that the attempt that the Earl of Warenne made at full manorial government between 1263 and 1275 was a temporary aberration. The lord of the borough was probably only lord in so far as he received its issues, but, as lord of the manor, he had a more direct control over his manorial tenants through the court of Stamford in its capacity as the manorial court. A full discussion of these problems is, however, beyond the scope of this essay. It is sufficient to conclude that the reorganisation of administration which accompanied the construction of the castle was the context in which the medieval town developed.

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Notes
9. ibid., 1,5 note; VCH Northamptonshire, i, 277-8.
10. Domesday Book... Fac-simile of the part relating to Northamptonshire, Ordnance Survey, Southampton 1862, ii.
19. ibid., 217; Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous, III, 994; Calendar of Patent Rolls 1370-4, 235; F. Peck, Antiquarian Annals of Stamford, London 1727, Bk. I, II.
22. ibid., 36 note 10, Rotuli Hundredorum, i, Record Commission 1812, 351-7.
23. ibid.
24. See, for example, Close Rolls 1242-7, 214, 374; 1251-3, 333; 1254-6, 38; Calendar of Charters Rolls 1226-57, 472.