Grist to the Mill
A New Approach to the Early History of Sleaford

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Recent work on the early history of Sleaford has cast considerable doubt on the proposal first advanced by Professor M.W. Beresford and W.H. Hosford, that New Sleaford was entirely a twelfth century new town. The documentary work of David Roffe appears to demonstrate that the 'Eslaforde' of Domesday book could not (as such an interpretation demands) have been the hamlet of Old Sleaford, which was an ecclesiastical and manorial dependency of the nearby village of Quarlington; and emergency excavations in Sleaford Market Place, carried out by the South Lincolnshire Archaeological Unit in 1978, have revealed clear signs of an eighth- and ninth-century Anglo-Saxon settlement (quite possibly a market), at the heart of the supposed medieval 'new town'!

Indeed, New Sleaford may well have been a very important late Anglo-Saxon estate centre or 'caput', the original influence of which can be traced through the widespread nature of its Domesday sokeland. Roffe suggested that it might have had some primary function as a judicial and administrative hub for both the wapentakes of Flaxwell and Aswardhurn in the pre-Danish period. He also speculated that there might be a close (if unproven) link between Sleaford and another estate centre at Ruskington, about four miles to the north. Ruskington had a similar widespread scattering of sokeland in Domesday Book, but (unlike Sleaford) this fell only within its own wapentake of Flaxwell.

Given the complicated nature of the evidence in this debate, it is perhaps not surprising that no detailed attention has been paid to the early economic structure of the estate at Sleaford. Indeed, little evidence is available for such a task and some of the most useful (an extent of the castle and manor made in 1324 and two compiti covering the years 1523-4) relates to a period of agricultural depression? Nevertheless, there are abundant clues from a number of sources that New Sleaford remained a place of some local importance for the collection, storage, milling and distribution of grain as late as the seventeenth century; and that in the period before the fourteenth century, its significance in these respects had been far greater.

The bishop's castle at Sleaford, besides serving as a defensive site and an administrative base, was also a fortified grain store. The extent of the castle made in 1324 mentions a barn ('granaria') within the outer defences, which was used to store the incoming agricultural produce for the episcopal estates until it could be sold or sent for milling at the town's water mills. In the middle of the sixteenth century, when the new lord of Sleaford, Robert Carre, began to despoil the castle and allow it to fall into disrepair, the loss of this barn (for its successor on the site) was cited as a matter of particular concern. Where in the said Manor the King and Queen hath a castle very defensible against rebels or enemies... this same Carre hath taken down there and uncovered a goodly barn belonging thereto, as the like is not in all the country, and would have held three hundred loads of corn or hay?

Just as the impressive size of this structure gives some clue to the significance the castle must once have had as a storehouse, so comparatively late references to the mills of the town continue to hint at their earlier importance to the local economy. When Carre's predecessor, Lord Hussey, was attainted for treason in 1527 one of the first actions of Thomas Hall, acting as receiver for Hussey's Sleaford possessions, seems to have been to petition Cromwell (unsucccessfully) for the mills in the town, even though we know that several of them were in a state of 'great ruyn & decay' at that time? In the seventeenth century, the rights of the Carre family to take toll of all the corn coming into the town, and to have exclusive milling soke there, were still sufficiently valuable to be vigorously defended in two Exchequer inquiries taken in 1635 and 1636.

Once again, the probability of a decline in importance in the later Middle Ages is apparent from the steep drop in profits experienced by the mills traditionally held in demesne, in the century after 1225. At about that time, according to an apparently reliable custumal, four of them were valued at over £39; by 1324 (which may, as already suggested, have been a low point) this had fallen to just £13 for all five. In the first half of the thirteenth century, in contrast, the profitability of the milling soke in the manor may have had a not inconsiderable bearing on Bishop Alexander of Lincoln's decision to convert part of New Sleaford into a borough?

Whatever may have been the economic situation in ensuing centuries, the Domesday Book entries for Sleaford are chiefly remarkable for the number and value of the mills recorded there. In the main entry for 'Eslaforde', no less than eight mills rendered a yearly income of £10 for the bishop, whilst in the subordinate entry for the Repton Abbey fee (which probably represents Old Sleaford), there was a further mill worth 21s 4d. In the contiguous manor of Quarlington, which was the mother parish of Old Sleaford and had been held as part of the Sleaford estate since before the Conquest, there were two more mills worth 16s.

In terms of numbers of mills alone, this places Sleaford third in the Lincolnshire 'league table': Tealby had 15 mills, Lowth 13 and Nettleham 9. But in terms of value, there was little comparison between these manors and Sleaford: the Nettleham mills were worth just £1; those at Lowth were valued at 60s; the 11 1/2 mills at Tealby for which figures are extant were worth 47s 10d. In all these cases, the quantity of mills appears to be a reflection of their limited size and capacity, many of them being located on the fast but relatively small rivers flowing off the Wolds?

At Sleaford, in contrast, the concentration was apparently due to the exceptionally favourable water supply. The River Slea's unusual qualities were remarked upon by several writers in later centuries: an abundant flow of water in the summer, and a current and temperature level sufficient to ensure that it never froze over, even in the severest winters. Such conditions obviously made it an ideal location for watermills; their number in 1087 makes it probable that (as with other large Domesday mill clusters) the Sleaford estate may have been a very early, as well as a very important, corn-grinding region. Such a proposition not only reinforces the suggestion that Sleaford had long been a production centre of some significance - perhaps the 'caput' of a Middle Anglian royal estate - but inevitably prompts questions about the possible role of the mills in determining the eventual gravitation of settlement towards New Sleaford.

Of the eleven Domesday mills on the Sleaford estate, a significant number had apparently disappeared by a
comparatively early date. From the time of the 1258 custurnal, however, it is possible to trace the history of the remaining five and locate their positions with considerable confidence. The uppermost ('Pond', 'Dam' or 'Castle') mill was counted as a 'double mill' for much of its life. This may simply mean that there were two sets of millstones driven by one wheel; but the frequency with which it is given plural forms in medieval documents, and the explicit reference to it as two mills 'under one roof' or 'in one house' in the sixteenth century, makes it more likely that there were originally two wheels in operation. It was situated at the point where the Slea was crossed by the raised causeway leading to Sleaford castle; but it seems originally to have been approached along a road known as 'Millgate', which branched off one of the medieval routes from the nearby villages into the town. Two more mills ('The Hurn Mill' and 'The Malt Mill') stood in close proximity to one another, close to the medieval market place. One further corn mill, Cogglesford Mill (which will be discussed at a later point), stood much further to the east, in the area immediately north of Old Sleaford. These were the five 'ancient water grist milles' which figure in the seventeenth century inquisitions (Fig. 1).

What had become of the remaining six Domesday watermills? One of them, described as 'lucta antiquam uadam Slaefordie' (and probably that listed as belonging to the Ramsey fee in 1087), passed into the hands of the Gilbertine priory of Haverholme during the episcopate of Robert de Chesney (1148-1166), and is so catalogued in the 1258 custurnal. Its eventual fate is unknown, but it had disappeared by the time of the Dissolution. It is not impossible that further mills passed unrecorded into the possession of the same Priory, which was founded and endowed by Bishop Alexander. However, the list of its milling possessions on the River Slea at the time of the Dissolution can easily be established, and at that time most lay well to the east of Sleaford. Mills could, of course, fall into disuse and disappear with scant trace of their former existence; although all the evidence suggests that they were surprisingly durable features of the landscape. Once a site had been prepared and leats cut, they became economic assets not lightly abandoned, unless local water-supply conditions changed.

In the case of the Slea, however, very considerable interference with the course of the river over the centuries cannot be ruled out. It was straightened, widened and otherwise altered to facilitate the passage of barges when the Slea Navigation was built in 1794. Fortunately, there are maps and records to show what was done at that time, and no work was undertaken west of the line of Southgate. Previous tampering with the local drainage arrangements, whilst evident enough, is much more difficult to date. The main branch of the Slea, on which four of the five original watermills were situated, has every appearance of being an early feature; although it may have been partially canalised west of Castle Causeway as early as the twelfth century, to facilitate the transporation of stone for the construction of Bishop Alexander's castle. There was a dam at the head of Castle Causeway, and a pond (probably of some size) to its west, all apparently part of a complicated system for controlling the flow of water through the town and directing a proportion of it into the castle moat. The southern arm of the Slea (known as the 'Nine Foot') appears to be entirely artificial and is probably to be interpreted as part of the outflow arrangements from this. None of the modern watercourses west of the castle is therefore necessarily original. That an earlier arm of the Slea crossed Southgate at a point somewhere along the line of the ancient wapentake boundary seems likely, although whether this was closed off in the twelfth century or earlier.
remains a matter for speculation (Fig. 1). $^{17}$

It is obviously tempting to conclude that some of the missing Domesday mills were located on such a lost section of the river, particularly since this would help to account for the presence of the two mills at Quarriington, whose locations is otherwise difficult to imagine. If (as Ekwall suggests) the name ‘Quarrington’ means ‘the millers’ tān’ [settlement], this would suggest a specialised function within the Anglo-Saxon multiple estate; emphasising, again, the importance of corn milling to the local economy during that period. $^{18}$ However, in the modern topography there would be insufficient water supply to power any mills at Quarriington east of the fen. If a branch of the River Slea originally did indeed follow the wapentake boundary, it would at least provide credible sites for them. However speculative, a number of mills (or groups of mills) scattered along the Slea at favourable locations between the fen edge and Old Sleaford is a hypothesis which deserves close examination.

However, the confluence of the main river and the Nine Foot east of Southgate does not mean that the interference in its course is at an end. East of the town, in the Old Sleaford area, it divides again into two branches: the ‘New Slea’, along which the Slea Navigation was constructed; and the ‘Old Slea’ to the south of this, which continues to define the parish and wapentake boundary. Despite being the route eventually used to create the Slea Navigation, the New Slea branch was in existence in its present form long before the eighteenth century. A large number of watermills (six in all) are indicated on the plans for the Navigation (which tellingly refer to it as ‘the Mill Stream’), and the history of a number of them can be traced with confidence back to the medieval period. The section west of the Sleaford parish boundary has a number of features which (even allowing for the alterations of the Navigation) suggest artificial or semi-artificial origins. In contrast, the corresponding section of the Old Slea has every appearance of being the original course of the river and the earliest fording place for the prehistoric trackway (Fig. 2). $^{19}$

One possible medieval mill site has now been identified on the Old Slea, which may mark the position of the Prior of Haverholme’s mill ‘near the old ford’. $^{20}$ On the northern ‘Mill Stream’, two further mills were situated: ‘Dyer’s Mill’, close to the boundary of New Sleaford parish; and Cogglesford Mill, just to the north of the medieval hamlet of Old Sleaford.

The age of Dyer’s Mill is not clear. For much of its history it was a fulling or ‘walk’ mill, and it may have been newly constructed for that purpose by Haverholme Priory (which had rights over the waters of the Slea some considerable distance below the Isle of Haverholme). Equally, an earlier corn mill could have been converted for this purpose. Dyer’s mill appears to be identical with ‘Teleby Mill’, which is listed in the Priory’s possessions at the time of the Dissolution; but it cannot be traced with confidence earlier than that time. $^{21}$

Over Cogglesford Mill, however, there is little room for doubt. Alone of Sleaford’s watermills, it still stands (Fig. 3). The present building is chiefly of eighteenth and nineteenth century construction, but a grist mill has stood on the same spot for very much longer. In the 1550s, it was the subject of a protracted dispute over the payment of tithes, which fortunately coincided with the period during which it acquired its present name. Deponents in the case were specifically required to say whether the mill called

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Fig. 2 The River Slea between Sleaford and Haverholme, 1773; (part of Creasey’s Navigation map: LAO, Smith 9/2/10).
However surprising the implications, the very nature of any possible rights in such a mill would seem to make it far more likely that a ‘shire-reeve’ in a much earlier sense of the expression is to be understood: a royal official in charge of the administration on a pre-Danish multiple estate or ‘shire’. If a Middle Anglian territorial unit of the sort previously proposed was once in existence in the region, a ‘shire-reeve’ and a ‘shire-reeve’s mill’ would have been understandable elements in it. The work of Professor Barrow has drawn attention to other mills bearing such a name which formed part of the administrative structures on early multiple estates. In the model he establishes, such a mill (logically located in a king’s tun or royal vill) was the preserve of the ‘shire-reeve’ or royal bailiff: a mill, with protected superior rights over all the others on the estate, to which tenants were originally obliged to bring at least a proportion of their corn. Interestingly, such peculiarities (preserved in the soke of certain mills belonging to a lord ‘external’ to the manor in which they lay) were long ago noticed as a particular feature of the Lincolnshire Domesday.

Such an explanation would, of course, be entirely consistent with large-scale corn milling in the Sleaford area. If a combination of favourable geographical factors made the Anglo-Saxon estate at Sleaford ideal for the siting of mills, then constructing a massive leat such as this section of the ‘Mill Stream’, to power additional mills, might have been a logical means of increasing capacity.

If corn milling was indeed a significant influence on the area’s early development, then clearly the relationship between the present town of New Sleaford and the medieval hamlet at Old Sleaford needs to be re-thought yet again. The reason why Roman and Iron Age settlements existed at Old Sleaford is presumed to be the original ford at that point. A direct relationship between these and the later hamlet cannot, however, be presumed. Medieval Old Sleaford may have originated as much as a result of the concentration of corn mills on the Slea, which extended from New Sleaford and Quarrington in the west to Rusington in the east; all conceivably part of one large territorial unit in Anglo-Saxon times. The number and productivity of the mills may have been quite as important as the location of the fords in determining the eventual administrative and economic importance of these settlements.

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NOTES

The following abbreviations are used throughout:

LAC = Lincolnshire Archives Office
LRS = Lincoln Record Society
PRO = Public Record Office


18. PRO E142/18, SC6/913/8; C. Platts, Land and People in Medieval Lincolnshire, History of Lincolnshire IV (Lincoln, 1985), p. 117 et seq.


22. Medford, Archaeologia, I, pp. 98-108; Robert Hutton, Record Commission (London 1812-1818), I, p. 280; L. H. S.溺sford 2/A/Box 1 (translation of Queen's College Oxford Ms. 366); PRO SC6/913/8, SC6/913/9. The custumal dates from 1258 but, according to the title at the four mills is dated from the sixteenth year of Bishop Hugh II.


27. PRO SC6/913/9 ('molenidion in anglice'), E310/2, f.352v; E310/3/16/102; L. H. S.溺sford Misc. Dom. 594/1, f.9v and 9v; ibid., Sleaford Glebe Terriers (undated terrier of c.1600). The last two between them, locate precisely the two mills.

28. L. H. S.溺sford Dij 87/1/26, printed in C. W. Foster, ed., The Registrum Antiquissimum of the Cathedral Church of Lincoln, II, LRS 28 (Horncastle, 1955), pp. 32-33. Canon Foster proposed (not unreasonably, at first sight) that this was Coggesthall Mill, on the grounds that 'antiquam uadam' referred to the nearby ford. However, Coggesthall Mill remained in the Bishop's hands whilst this one was granted to the 'Nuns of Sempingham' (in reality, Haverholme Priory). It is probable that 'antiquam uadam' is actually the ford on the Old Slea, rather than the 'coggest ford' on the New Slea (see also below, Note 20). The latter has now disappeared, but see Fig. 2 for its location.

29. The Haverholme curtilage has not survived but there is a very full inspection of 1337 (Calendar of Patent Rolls, IV, 1327-1341, pp. 403-19). A number of charters have also been printed in Lincolnshire Notes and Queries, XVII (1922-3), pp. 7-48, 65-74, 89-93. (I am grateful to Mrs Dorothy Owen for a reference to these, also Valor Ecclesiasticus, Record Commission (London, 1810-1834), IV, p. 118; J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel, eds., Dugdale's Monasticon (London, 1811-1850), VI, Part 2, p. 950; PRO SC6/2/16/VIII/1988, m.18.

30. J. Creasey, Report Respecting the Advantages of the Facility and Expense, on Opening a Navigable Communication from the Town of New Sleaford (Sleaford, 1772), L. H. S.溺sford C232/18 and Smith 9/2/10 (Creasey's plan for a Navigation on the Old Slea, 1773), K3F/13 (plans dated 1792 by Jessop and Hudson, for a Navigation on the Old Slea). It was the Jessop and Hudson plan which formed the blueprint for the Slea Navigation opened in 1794. A projected westward extension to, Castle Ceausby and beyond, was never actually built because of lack of funds - W. M. Hunt, A History of the Slea Navigation (unpublished Open University M. Phil dissertation, 1979), pp. 211-14.