Hereward ‘the Wake’ and the Barony of Bourne: A Reassessment of a Fenland Legend

David Roffe

Hereward, generally known as ‘the Wake’, is second only to Robin Hood in the pantheon of English heroes. From at least the early twelfth century his deeds were celebrated in Anglo-Norman aristocratic circles, and he was no doubt the subject of many a popular tale and song from an early period.1 But throughout the Middle Ages Hereward’s fame was local, being confined to the East Midlands and East Anglia.2 It was only in the nineteenth century that the rebel became a truly national icon with the publication of Charles Kingsley’s novel Hereward the Wake.3 The transformation was particularly Victorian: Hereward is portrayed as a prototype John Bull, a champion of the English nation. The assessment of historians has generally been more sober. Racial overtones have persisted in many accounts, but it has been tacitly accepted that Hereward expressed the fears and frustrations of a landed community under threat. Paradoxically, however, in the light of the nature of that community, the high social standing that the tradition has accorded him has been denied.4

The earliest recorded notice of Hereward is the almost contemporary annal for 1071 in the D version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Northern recension probably produced at York,5 its account of the events in the fenland is terse. It records the plunder of Peterborough in 1070 ‘by the men that Bishop Æthelric [i.e. of Durham] had excommunicated because they had there all that he had’, and the rebellion of Earls Edwin and Morcar in the following year. Edwin was killed and Morcar retreated into the fen with various Englishmen. In reply King William dispatched a fleet and land force and besieged the Isle of Ely where the rebels had resorted. They were all forced to surrender ‘except Hereward alone and those who could escape with him, and he led them out valiantly’.6 This is the only notice of Hereward, and it would appear that his escape was already such a well-known story as to require no further explanation. The E version, in an interpolation composed at Peterborough c.1121,7 casts no light on the episode but introduces Hereward into the story at an earlier point. It recounts that a Danish army went to Ely and all the fenland people went to them in the expectation that they would conquer England. Meanwhile, with the appointment of the Norman Torald as abbot of Peterborough by King William, Hereward and his band in an apparently related incident plundered the monastery and took all the treasure to Ely from where the Danes, bought off by the king, took it to Denmark. The siege of Ely is then recounted in the same terms as those of the D version. Hereward is simply identified as one of the abbey’s men.8

Later literary sources are more forthcoming. Gaimar, in his L’Estreor des Engles written c.1140, calls him ‘a noble man... one of the best of the country’.9 Other sources expand on this theme. In the mid-twelfth-century work known as the De Gestis Herewardi Saxoniae Hereward is said to have been the son of Leofric, kinsmen of Earl Ralph Scalde (that is, staller), and Ediva great-great-granddaughter of Earl Osric of Northumberland, and to have married Turfrida, a Flemish woman of noble birth. His patrimony was the manor of Bourne in Lincolnshire, and it was the loss of the estate to an unnamed Norman which prompted Hereward to lead a rebellion against the hated foreigners and take a primary role in the siege of Ely. The story ends with Hereward coming to terms with King William after his flight from the Isle and the restoration of his patrimony.10 The late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century Historia Croelandensis records much the same information, with the substitution of Earl Ralph of Hereford for Ralph the staller and with the added detail that Hereward was the nephew of Abbot Brand of Peterborough. However, it continues the story by asserting that Hereward’s daughter subsequently married Hugh de Evermoue, bringing with her her inheritance of the manor of Bourne, and that their daughter married Richard de Rullos.11 Finally, a fifteenth-century genealogy of the Wake family and account of the descent of their barony of Bourne again makes him lord of the estate and notices its descent through the marriage of Hereward’s daughter to Hugh de Evermoue, but asserts that the rebel was the son of Earl Leofric of Mercia and Lady Godiva.12

The suggested chronology of the Historia Croelandensis may be suspect - Richard de Rullos is made to be a contemporary of Hereward while married to his granddaughter - but there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in these accounts. Hereward’s high social standing is consistent with the role he is reported to have assumed in the rebellion, and native families, especially in the North, were often successful in maintaining title to their lands in the years immediately after the Conquest, whilst the manipulation of English titles by English magnates was attested. Ivo Taillebois held the honour of Bolingbroke by right of his wife the Countess Lucy who was the daughter of Thordal the sheriff or Earl Ælfgar of Mercia; the history of the fee in the twelfth century turned upon her rights in the land rather than those of Ivo or her two further husbands.13 The tenure of the Lincolnshire lands of Colsuan, Alfred of Lincoln, Colegrim, Robert Malet, and Durand Malet were all likewise underpinned by English title.14 Nevertheless, Hereward’s rights in Bourne and their transfer through his family have been rejected. Domesday Book shows that the manor was held by Earl Morcar in 1066.15 Hereward apparently only held part of Laughton and its soké in his own right; otherwise his most substantial holdings were parcels of land held of the abbey of Crowland and Peterborough in Rippingale and in Witham on the Hill, Barholm, and Stowe respectively.16

Domesday Book, then, apparently substantiates the account of the E version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Far from the aristocrat of the literary sources, Hereward would seem to have been a mere tenant of religious houses. Round argued that the elevation of his status and his association with Bourne was a later invention prompted by the subsequent tenure of Earl Morcar’s lands by the lords of Bourne.17 The Rippingale manor was already held by Oger the Breton, who succeeded Earl Morcar in Bourne, in 1086. Witham on the Hill and its sokelands, by contrast, were held of the abbey by a certain Ansford at that time and so continued until granted to the lords of Bourne in return for knight service in the twelfth century.18 It was, then, natural to associate Hereward with Bourne and it was but a small step to make him a member of the Wake family who then held it.

This conclusion has gone largely unchallenged, but it is not beyond criticism. The De Gestis Herewardi was apparently written in the mid twelfth century by Richard of Ely and is probably a polished and extended version of an earlier draft which is entered in the Liber Eliensis.19 In common with its genre, the De Gestis is not without its stereotypes. Much of the account of Hereward’s early life is phantastic, rigorously conforming to what was expected of a hero.20 Nevertheless, in the later sections a real personality repeatedly emerges from its pages. Hereward is far too hot-headed and at times downright vicious to be the perfect hero. Much of the detail is of course unparalleled and is therefore unverifiable. The historical
As difficult as it is to determine social rank in Domesday, there are hints that Hereward’s essential qualification for this role was his status as a king’s thane. Before the Conquest, society in Lincolnshire was characterized by a high degree of freedom. Land was held by serfs and thegns who had free disposal of their estates and performed the public service assessed upon them in person within the wapentake. Soke, however, a term which encompassed a whole variety of judicial dues, food rents, and labour services, was usually reserved to an overlord who answered for his liberties directly to king within the shire. It was such king’s thanes rather than the thegns on the ground who were designated as predecessors and conferred title on tenants-in-chief in 1086. Hereward would appear to have been in a relationship of this type to Oger the Breton. He is not recorded as the holder of sako and soke in the list which is appended to the account of the county boroughs in the Lincolnshire folio; the schedule is far from complete and therefore does not provide an exhaustive list of predecessors. But the text probably indicates that Oger held his tenure through the king, for the land is described in a multiple manor entry, a form which often, if not always, records the name of the overlord. More clearly, Oger’s tenure of Crowland’s manor of Rippingle was derived from Hereward. Crowland’s plea that the land belonged to the abbey was on the ground that Hereward had relinquished his tenure before the Conquest rather than that Oger had no intrinsic claim to it. Had Hereward not been a king’s thane the tenant-in-chief would not have had a presumptive right beyond that of mere appropriation.

If the Domesday evidence supports the assertion that Hereward was of high status, it cannot prove that he held the manor of Bourne. However, it does suggest that there is a question mark over Morcar’s tenure of the estate. The Domesday survey is famously imprecise in its record of pre-Conquest lords and tenants. In the initial stages of the inquiry it was intended that details of tenure on ‘the day on which King Edward was alive and dead’ were to be recorded, but in practice a precise date of title was largely abandoned in the course of the survey. Thus, some of the individuals referred to held a long time before 1066, others after the death of Edward the Confessor. Throughout the counties of the North and the East Midlands, for example, Earl Siward is recorded as an immediate predecessor, although in fact he died in 1055 and his lands had passed to various individuals before 1066 and their grant by William I, whilst in East Anglia post-Conquest Normans are frequently named as predecessors. More importantly, the status and rights of these holders are often vague. Those of Earl Morcar are particularly ambiguous. He is recorded as holding a large number of estates in Lincolnshire, but he did not have full rights to all of them. Thus, the manor of Castle Bytham, to the west of Bourne, is ascribed to him, but a will of 1066 by Normans reveals that it was held by a king’s thane called Ulf son of Pope. Likewise, Earl Morcar seems to have held the lands of Merlousen at some point. He evidently only held these lands in some kind of temporary capacity, either as the earl or the earl’s representative - he may have held Lincolnshire as part of his earldom of Northumbria or alternatively may have been constituted as a separate earldom which was held by his overlord Earl Edgwin. In the same sequence of events to have been equally equivocal. Drew de Beurre, presumably on the basis of his tenure of ‘Earl Morcar’s’ manor of Bytham, claimed Bourne. The jurors of Avendale Wapentake denied his right but nevertheless remitted all claims to Morcar’s lands to the king.

The tenure of Bourne by Hereward is thus not precluded by the Domesday account of the estate. The survey substantiates the assertion of the De Gestis that he was outlawed at some point in his life, and it is possible that Morcar merely held the estate as a forfeit after his flight. The subsequent history of the manor and the estates associated with it is complex. In 1086 Bourne was held by Oger son of Ungormar the Breton and was probably the caput of his small fee. The honour encompassed the whole of Bourne, along with various other sokels that had
been legally or otherwise appropriated from neighbouring lords, and the manors of Rippingale and Laughton in the wapentake of Walsingham and the manors of Kirkby in Leicestershire, Thraptown in Northamptonshire, and ‘Awsthorpe’ in Rutland.66 Oger’s lands are known to have passed to his son Ralph c.1105 but otherwise there is no clear evidence of the estate until it came into the hands of Baldwin fitz Gilbert of Clare in the 1120s or 1130s.67 He, however, may have held by right of his wife Acilna, the daughter of Richard de Rullus whose brother William had held his lands before him in succession to Hugh de Eurne. It was from this inheritance that lands of Godfrey de Cambrai in the Deepings, Bartholome and its soke, Creeton and its soke, and Wilsford in Lincolnshire, Sprotton in Leicestershire, and Thistleton in Rutland, and the fee of Baldwin the Fleming in the soke of Doddington Pigot in Lincolnshire came into the twelfth-century honour of Bourne.68

This, the known descent of the manor, does not substantiate the Historia Croylandensis’ account of the fee. Nor does it contradict its essential details. More positively Hereward’s rights almost certainly continued to inform the actions of the lords of Bourne after the eleventh century. It is not completely inconceivable that the acquisition of the manor and soke of Wilmouth on the Hill from Peterborough was carried out by Godfrey de Cambrai held land in Bartholome and Stowe in succession to one of the abbey’s men who can probably be identified as Godfrey’s predecessor Azor or Leofwulf;69 as Godfrey’s successor, the lords of Bourne may have been granted the adjacent estate of Witham to hold similarly of the abbot or have simply appropriated it.70 But this is unlikely. Part of the land was already claimed in 1086 through Hereward and in the early twelfth century Peterborough thought it expedient to acquire charters of confirmation, albeit by forgery.71 In neither case is the claimant named, but given the eventual settlement of the dispute, there can be no doubt that it was the lord of Bourne. The right that Baldwin fitz Gilbert perceived and made good in the early twelfth century clearly devolved upon Hereward.

Ultimately that right must have been founded in Hereward’s status as a king’s thegn and as Oger the Breton’s predecessor. However, it is improbable that a purely legalistic concept of that kind would have carried much weight in the twelfth century. Lawsuits did proceed from the Domnessay process,72 but by and large the de facto tenures of 1080 seem to have been sanctioned by entry in the Great Survey, or became so, for little action was taken to restore estates to their rightful holders thereafter.73 Hereditary right was a more potent force and would provide a more plausible explanation for Baldwin’s claim. The Historia Croylandensis may not tell the full story: Oger the Breton, and his son from him, clearly had an interest in the estate and the sources would therefore demand that a daughter of Hereward married one or the other of them before Hugh de Eurne. But the Historia and the genealogy do provide a not unreasonable solution to the otherwise perplexing puzzle of the origins of the barony of Bourne.

It can be suggested, then, that greater reliance can be placed on the account of Hereward’s background in the literary sources than modern historiography has hitherto allowed. Domnessay Book supports the Peterborough tradition that Hereward was a tenant of the abbey, but it would seem that he was more protector than creature of the foundation. As much is preserved in the abbey’s sources, for Hugh Candidus, using much the same material as the author of the E Chronicle, reported in the late twelfth century that Hereward justified his sacking of the monastery in precisely those terms.74 Such a role clearly must have been underpinned by a substantial patrimony and a powerful kin. The De Gestis Herewardi, the Historia, and the rest provide a plausible account of that background which is consistent, or at least not inconsistent, with the known facts of Hereward’s landed interests and their subsequent fate.

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NOTES
9. L’Estoire des Engyles, lines 5462-64.
15. Lincolnshire Domesday, 42/1.
16. Lincolnshire Domesday, 8/34, 35, 37, 42/13.
29. Abels, Lordship and Military Obligation, pp.154-55. For example, Beornric son of Aelfgar, one of the greatest thegns in the West Midlands, held Bushey (Wores) from the bishop of Worcester on similar terms to those by which Hereward held Rippingale (Frank and Caroline Thorn, eds, Domesday Book: Worcestershire, (Chichester, 1982), 2, 30, 54).
34. *Lincolnshire Domesday*, 35/13; 72/5.
35. Morcar had the earl’s penny of Teircye, but Edwin held the comital manor of Kirton in Lindsey in succession to Earl Tosti (*Lincolnshire Domesday*, p.13/3; 1/36; John Morris, ed., *Domesday Book: Nottinghamshire* (Chichester, 1977), 1,65).
37. *Lincolnshire Domesday*, 72/4, 48. It is possible that the flight to which Domesday refers was Hereward’s escape from the Isle of Ely as recorded in the D Chronicle (Round, *Feudal England*, p.162). However, that interpretation is unlikely to be correct since the rebels had presumably been outlawed, and therefore forfeited the lands to which Crowland and Peterborough were making claim, long before their defeat.
38. *Lincolnshire Domesday*, 42/1-19; Philip Morgan, ed., *Domesday Book: Leicestershire* (Chichester, 1979), 38,1; Frank and Caroline Thorn, eds, *Domesday Book: Northamptonshire* (Chichester, 1979), 52,1; *Domesday Book: Rutland*, R14.
43. *Regesta II*, nos 1038, 1039.