The Meeting-Place of Langoe Wapentake.

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Although only twenty-six are mentioned in Domesday Book, evidence suggests that in 1086, as in later times, Lincolnshire comprised thirty-three wapentakes. Lying in the centre of the county, close to the northern edge of the district of Kesteven, the unit of Langoe included sixteen later parishes and was one of the largest of the Kesteven wapentakes, stretching from the borough of Lincoln in the north-west to Billington in the south-east. Its extent remained virtually unaltered until modern times. It was limited on the east by the natural boundary of the River Witham, which also marked the edge of the district of Lindsey, whilst much of the western boundary with Boodby Wapentake followed a ridge of highground along which the Roman Ermine Street runs. A distinct division in the landscape of the wapentake is discernible, the eastern half being characterised by low-lying fens and the western side consisting of higher heathland. The majority of the settlements recorded in Domesday Book are concentrated along the edge of this high ground in a line running north-south down the centre of the wapentake, and the parishes which grew up around them are often long and narrow, frequently stretching from one side of the wapentake to the other but in many cases measuring less than two or three kilometres north-south.

The wapentake name is first recorded in the Lincolnshire Domesday Book as Langehno. The earliest forms of the name quoted by Anderson show variation between the spellings Lang(e)hno (1086, c. 1155, 1180, 1200) Langehno (1130, 1166, 1168, 1185) and Langhowe (1285, 1323). These names suggest that the name is derived from ON lang ‘long’ and haugr ‘mound or hill’. In areas of Scandinavian settlement the element haugr is frequently applied to barrows, although it may also refer to natural hills. Like OE hław, it is common as the second element in the names of hundreds/wapentakes and their associated meeting-places, and may reflect a tradition of assembly at such sites. Several other Lincolnshire wapentakes have names in which the second element is haugr, including Threo (‘the three haugrs’), Candleshoe (‘Celdnoþ’s haugr’), Wraggoe (‘Wraggi’s haugr’), Aslakoe (Aslakr’s haugr) and Havseroe (‘Havserr’s haugr’). Only the last of these units has a moot site which can be located with certainty, but in this case the second element certainly appears to have denoted an artificial mound: a round barrow (now ploughed out) known as Horby Beacon in Hawerby parish.

The name of Langoe Wapentake suggests that the meeting-place of this unit may also have been at a barrow or tumulus. The site has not yet been identified, but a group of field-names situated in the parishes of Branton and Hevingham approximately six kilometres south-east of Lincoln, may point to its location. The 1847 Tithe Award for Branton records a field called Spelligate Close. This name can be traced back to the thirteenth century appearing, as Spelligate Closes, Spelligate Lane (1766), Spelllowgate (1605, a1680), Spelw(e)gate (1579, 1601) and Spellougate (from the time of Henry III). Cameron derives it from OE spel ‘speech, announcement’ and either OE hław ‘mound, hill’ or hōh ‘spur’. Compounds of OE spel with hław, hōh and also with ON haugr are relatively frequent and are often taken to indicate the meeting-place of an early medieval hundred or wapentake. The most obvious example is the lost place called Spellhoe in Northamptonshire which gave its name to the hundred of Spellhoe, but comparable place-names are widespread, particularly in the east of England. Within Lincolnshire itself we find Spellaw Wood, Horning, Spellowe, East Keal, Spellhau, Cabourne, Spellow, Nettleton, Spelleho, Calcethorpe, Spellow Hills, Langton by Partney, and Spellhow, Gayton le Wold. Not all these sites are necessarily the assembly-places of late Anglo-Saxon wapentakes, but it is usually presumed that they represent meeting-places of some sort. Accordingly, the Branton field-names may be taken as indicating the existence of an (early) medieval assembly-place.

Similar names occur in the adjacent parish of Heighington, where a sixteenth-century terrier records field-names including Spellaw Hyde, Spelleley Dale, Spellow Wang, Sundale, Spellah Hyde, Spellaw Gate, Spelleley Dale and Spellaw Dale. Although no earlier forms are available for these names it is highly likely they are derived from the same source as those discussed above, since the location of these fields, as far as it can be established, appears to have been adjacent to Spelligate Close, Branton. The latter is shown from the Branton Tithe Map to have been situated on the south side of the Branton-Hevingham boundary, east of the cross-roads at c. TP043669, lying on either side of Moor Lane which runs from Branton Booths at TP060690 towards Branton itself (p. 2) and within a few miles of the road joining east and west of the field the parish boundary follows this road, but at Spelligate Close it runs along the northern field-boundary. In the Heighington terrier two fields are described as having ‘branston field’ to the south, and this suggests that they lay on the other side of the parish boundary immediately above Spelligate Close. One of these, Spellay Hiil, the property of Thomas Cooke, also has highways to the west and north of the field in the corner of Potterhanworth Road and Moor Lane, below the track which is marked on the first edition six-inch Ordnance Survey map as Spellhill Lane. This name clearly also preserves a reference to the site although the track itself has now disappeared. To its east lay land belonging to Thomas Enderby the Elder. This was presumably Spella Wange, which likewise had Branston Field to the south and a highway to the north.

Thomas Enderby was also in possession of a field called Spella Hyde which lay west of ‘a lie way leadinge to brastoun’. The latter road is probably Moor Lane. The former might be identified with Potterhanworth Road, in which case the field in question lay on the north-west side of the crossroads, diagonally adjacent to Spelligate Close and opposite the other Spella Hyde field. This places Spella Hyde in the vicinity of the road junction, an arrangement which fits with several references in the terrier to what is clearly Potterhanworth Road as ‘the way that ledde forth from the towne ende of Hevingham to spella hill’. It seems that this road was also the Spelligate which gave its name to the Branton field, since the two fields described as by Spella Gate in the terrier must have lain either side of it: one between the road on the east and Branton Field on the west, and the other east of one highway (Potterhanworth Road) and north of another (possibly Ten Acre Lane).

Several of the remaining fields may be placed between Ten Acre Lane and Spellhill Lane. Three and a half acres described as Above Spella Hedge, having highways on both northern and western sides, may have lain at the corner of
Fig. 1. Lincolnshire wapentakes after A. Vince.

Potterhanworth Road and Ten Acre Lane, above land belonging to Hammond Gentle and called By Spella Hedge. Both of these have the land of William Paley to the east of them and this must have been his nine acres and three stongs at Spellay Dayle. South of this and abutting on Spelthill Lane lay the land of John Gentle (ten and a half acres in Stockwell and Spellay furlong), Robert Ashton (three acres, three stonges at Spella Hyll) and Thomas Enderby the Elder (five acres at Spella Dayle). A further five acres at Spellay Deale lying between here and the road was owned by Christopher Burrell. Thus, although a completely accurate reconstruction of the sixteenth-century field-system cannot be created without evidence for the shape of the fields themselves, the descriptions given in the terrier are sufficient to indicate that the spel- field-names are all situated within a limited area. Moreover, the concentration of the forms Spellat(y) Hyll in the area around TF036676 might lead one to suspect that the hlaw, hoth or hanger from which the name derived is to be found in this vicinity. Such a location would be appropriate for an early-medieval assembly-place since it lies on a parish boundary and at a cross-roads, both characteristics frequently associated with assembly-places.
Fig. 2. Approximate location of fields around Branston-Heighington Parish boundary.
The character of the feature from which the names derive remains a mystery, however. Cameron’s preferred second element is OE hōw – ‘spur’. There is certainly at least one other instance of this compound in Lincolnshire (Spellar Wood, Honington) and it is also the source of Spelthorne Northamptonshire mentioned above. However, whilst Spellar Wood is located on the end of a prominent ridge or spur (SK923440), the area in which the Branston/Heighton names are concentrated is very low-lying, lower indeed than much of the surrounding area, and there does not seem to be any feature in the area which would fit the classic description of a hōw – a ‘heel-shaped spur’. Margaret Gelling acknowledges that the term ‘is used occasionally of very low ridges which do not have diagnostic shapes’ but unless the name has become transferred from some distance away, even this is unlikely here.28 It seems therefore that another interpretation must be sought.

The alternative explanation is a derivation from OE hlaw or perhaps even ON haugar, since these elements are difficult to tell apart in their later forms. Both words may refer either to natural hills or, more frequently, to barrows. Again there is no obvious hill in the immediate vicinity of the names to which the terms might have been applied. Nevertheless, the fact that in the sixteenth-century fields in this area were still being referred to as Spella Hyll may indicate that at this date there was still some feature here which might be considered a ‘hill’. It is just possible that the name referred to a low rounded natural rise which is visible on the ground at this point and can just be followed in the contours of the 1:10,000 Ordnance Survey map. Perhaps more likely, however, is the possibility that the hylw was a barrow which has since been ploughed out, although none is recorded from the area.29

Given the possible existence of a ‘speech-mound’ in Branston/Heighton, then, could it be that this is the ‘long-mound’ to which the wapentake name refers? This question cannot be answered definitively although it certainly remains a possibility. A meeting-place here would have been towards the northern end of the wapentake but not altogether peripheral to it, and Branston was the caput of an eleventh-century saxon and thus a place of importance. The lang-hauar is perhaps unlikely to have been a Neolithic long-barrow like Spelhow Hills, Langton-by-Partney, since the majority of these monuments are concentrated in the north of the county on the Lincolnshire Wolds.30 However, any other sort of mound with a distinctive shape might have given rise to the name, and we should perhaps not altogether rule out the possibility that it and the Spellay Hylly were identical. Although far from conclusive, there is one final shred of evidence which might support this proposition. Only 800m south of the Spelligate crossroads is Longhills Hall (TF036667) and although the first recorded instance of this name is in 1579, it is perhaps just possible that this preserves a modified form of the wapentake name Lango – ‘the long hyl/mound’.31

Notes

2. It included the parishes of Washingborough, Canwick, Heighton, Branston, Potterhanworth, Nocton, Dunston, Metheringham, Blankney, Sparrowcote, Kirbymoor Green, Timberland, Thorpe Tilney, Walcot, Billinghay and North Kyme.
12. Pantos, ‘Anglo-Saxon Assembly-Places’. Place-names listed here have been collected from K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Lincolnshire* both published and unpublished volumes. The late Professor Cameron allowed me to use his unpublished notes in the preparation of my thesis for which I am extremely grateful.