

THE GRANT OF LAND IN DITTON

BY

KING ETHELRED II in AD 983

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### The AD 983 Charter

Possibly the earliest written reference to Ditton is the tenth-century charter of King Ethelred II in which he made a grant of land in "Dittune" to Ethelmar, one of his ministers, who became ealdorman of the Western Shires and in AD 1005 founded a monastery at Eynsham in Oxfordshire, using the land at Ditton as part of the foundation endowment.

The charter was deposited at Thorney Abbey in Cambridgeshire and appears in the Red Book of Thorney; copies of the manuscript are held by Cambridge University and the British Museum.

Why the charter came to be placed in the Thorney muniments is something of a mystery. Thorney was one of the lesser Anglo-Saxon monastic houses, founded in the seventh century, severely damaged by marauding Danes in 870 and completely rebuilt in Norman times. It existed under the shadow of both Peterborough and Crowland, being within half-a-dozen miles of each, where much more powerful religious centres flourished. The Ditton estate appears to have had no connection with Thorney so there was no reason for the charter to be deposited there unless, perhaps, the King was staying at, or in the neighbourhood of, the Abbey when he made the grant to Ethelmar.

### King Ethelred II

Ethelred was the last of the kings of England prior to the Danish invasions at the beginning of the eleventh century which led to the accession to the English throne of Cnut. Thus Ethelred was the last of a succession of Anglo-Saxon rulers extending back over 600 years to the first of the Anglo-Saxon invasions which followed the departure of the Roman Army in the fifth century. The multiplicity of local kingdoms which were created initially as a result of these invasions coalesced, over the years, into confederations - the most notable being Northumbria, East Anglia, Mercia, Wessex and Kent. It was King Alfred, however, who was instrumental in laying the foundations of a united England and the period from Alfred's accession in 871 to Ethelred's death in 1016 is one of a constant refinement of the unity of the kingdom.

Ethelred was crowned at Kingston-upon-Thames on 14th April 978. He was ten years old at the time and came to the throne in unhappy circumstances; his half-brother Edward, who was only five years older than Ethelred and had been crowned at Kingston only three years earlier, had been stabbed to death at Corfe Castle as a result of the intrigues of Ethelred's mother Queen Elfrida who desired to see her own son replace her step-son Edward as king.

Ethelred's name is derived from two Old English words "æ thel" and "ræ d" meaning "noble counsel"; it was a thirteenth century chronicler who recorded that Ethelred was known by the nickname "Unræ d". This pun could be interpreted as "no counsel" or "evil counsel" but the subtlety has been lost in the modern corruption "Ethelred the Unready". In many respects he was an ineffective king; he failed to hold the allegiance of many of the leading nobles and open revolt flared many times during his reign. Moreover he had the misfortune to rule at a time when Danish raids were reaching new peaks of ferocity and frequency. Nevertheless, by remarkable feats of diplomacy and by persuasive use of 'Danegeld' he kept his throne for nearly forty years, longer than any monarch since King Offa of Mercia in the eighth century.

This, then, was the king who, in 983, gave his minister Ethelmar the Ditton estate.

The text of the AD 983 charter

The grant is in Latin except for the statement of the bounds of the estate which is given in Old English.

The document starts with a preamble in flowery style extolling pious sentiments; this is followed by a declaration that Ethelred, King of all Britain, gives his exceedingly faithful minister Ethelmar a gift of nine hides of land in the place commonly known as Ditton to be for his exclusive use in his lifetime and to be his to bequeath to anyone he pleases as an inheritance after his death. Then follows a passage in which the gift is made exempt from all burdens, save the three common ones of service to the king, maintenance of roads and bridges and the duty to provide warriors for defence of the realm when needed. Next comes the anathema, or solemn curse, promising eternal hell-fire for anyone who dishonours the grant and its terms, after which are given the bounds of the land comprising the gift. The final section gives the date of the grant and a list of the witnesses and their signatures, including Archbishop Dunstan of Canterbury, Archbishop Oswald of York, Bishop Ethelwold of Winchester and Bishop Elfstan of London.

The text of the bounds section is as follows:-

Ðiŕ sýnð þa land zemæro to Dictune. of  
Cranmeyer þorne to blacan zhræfan. of þære blacan zhræfan  
on seofan æceŕas eaſteþearde. of þam seofan æceŕon  
on Æmenan andlanz Æmenan be healŕon ŕreame  
innon Cýtanford. of Cýtanforda to Tatanbroce.  
of Tatanbroce on Cricelmeŕþýrde eaſteþearde.

Ðiŕ is ŕe puða. on þær hazan ende to  
Byrlazate. fram Byrlazate to riðanzate. fram  
riðanzate to Cnucehýrŕte. and to Ezceanlæa.  
fram Ezceanlæa to þam haran riðie.

which translates to:-

'These are the bounds of Ditton: from the crane-lake thornbush to the white grove, from the white grove eastwards into the seven fields, from the seven fields to the Emene, along the Emene by the bank of the stream to Cyta's ford, from Cyta's ford to Tata's brook, from Tata's brook eastwards to Living Elms farm. This is the wood. To the end of the enclosure by the horse-gate, from the horse-gate to the wide-gate, from the wide-gate to Cnuc's copse and to Ecga's meadow, from Ecga's meadow to the hare willow.'



At first sight there is nothing particularly unique that identifies the estate, whose bounds are so described, with the Ditton in Surrey (there are several other Dittons in England, one certainly much closer to Thorney than Surrey) except for the reference to *Æmenan*. Now *Æmenan* is the Old English name for the river today known as the Mole, this more recent name being derived from the villages of East and West Moulsey which developed from late Anglo-Saxon times. The bridge over the *Æmenan* near its confluence with the Thames was known as *Æmenan-brycg* which was rendered *Amelebrige* by the Norman scribes of the Domesday Book and reduced to *Elmbridge* in modern times. Thus the reference to *Æmenan* in the charter is an indication, at least, that the estate is in Ditton, Surrey.

#### The AD 1005 charter

Further confirmation that the Ditton of the AD 983 charter is located in Surrey may be obtained, indirectly, from a later charter contained in the Cartulary of Eynsham Abbey, Oxon. (Copies of which are at the British Museum and Lambeth Palace). This charter, addressed by King Ethelred to the Abbey of Eynsham, is dated AD 1005 and is a confirmation both of the foundation of the abbey by the same Ethelmar and of the endowment. The charter is, again, in Latin except for the bounds of estates forming the endowment which are given in Old English; the estates are widely dispersed and include properties in Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Two of them are of relevance to Ditton history, namely *Dictune* and *Æscære*.

The bounds quoted for *Dictune* are almost word-for-word identical to those given in the AD 983 charter; the inference is that the two charters refer to the same Ditton, wherever it is located. The bounds quoted for *Æscære* show quite clearly that this estate is adjacent to the Ditton estate since they share common boundary points; moreover *Æscære* can be identified with Esher, thus showing that the AD 983 charter does indeed refer to the Ditton in Surrey. The bounds of *Æscære* translates thus:-

'These are the boundaries of the land at *Æscære*. First from the crane-lake eastwards to the corner of Lullesworth on Mela's hill, eastwards from Mela's hill to the middle of Wina's hill, from Wina's hill to the middle of the alder brook, from the brook to the old ditch, along the ditch to the red copse, by the roots to the red bourn, along the red bourn to the *Æmenan* by the side of the stream to Bula's farm and from Bula's farm along the straight boundary to *Wæstan's* tree, thence to the crane-lake. Six weirs belong thereto.'

#### Interpreting the bounds of *Æscære*, from the AD 1005 charter

Not only can *Æscære* be identified with modern Esher but much of the boundary described in the charter can be traced on present-day maps. The following points are worth noting:-

(i) *Æscære* is an Old English name for Esher, rendered by the scribes of the Domesday Book as *Aissele* (an instance of the frequent Norman confusion of Anglo-Saxon 'r' with French 'l') and subsequently, down the ages, convoluted through *Aissere*, *Assere*, *Asher* etc. to Esher.

*Æscære* may have been derived from two Old English stems '*æsc*' (ash) and '*scæron*' (division or share), the compound word perhaps implying a share in common property, the division being marked by a row of ash trees.

(ii) a crane-lake features as a starting point, as in the AD 983 charter.

(iii) Lullesworth, i.e. Lull's enclosure or Lull's farm, may be equated with present-day Lisleworth (see 6" Ordnance Survey map) which is located within reasonable proximity of a pool in Sandown Park; perhaps this pool was

the original crane-lake. Opposite Sandown Park is, of course, Littleworth Common - perhaps another variant of Lulleworth.

(iv) Although Mela's hill and Wina's hill cannot now be identified the present Esher/Thames Ditton boundary east of Littleworth runs on higher ground.

(v) The alder brook ('alorbroc' in Old English) could be the stream today known as the Rythe.

The Rythe today rises on Esher Common just behind Copsem Manor, flows more-or-less northwards to the Scilly Isles and then north-eastwards to join the Thames near Winter's Bridge; it forms the Esher/Thames Ditton boundary for much of its route from source to Littleworth Common.

In 1314 a place named Alrebok is mentioned in the Surrey Feet of Fines of 7 Edward II; it appears in 1279 as Allerbrok and as Abroke on Speed's 1610 map. It developed into Arbrook comparatively recently (Arbrook Common, Arbrook Farm) by which time the stream itself was known as the Rythe.

(vi) There are several minor, natural watercourses on Esher Common, but the term 'ditch' perhaps implies a man-made water-way (the Old English term 'dic' was used often to denote a defensive or drainage linear excavation). One such ditch runs in a straight line for the best part of a mile due east from Upper Court and terminates at its eastern end adjacent to the source of the Rythe. At its western end it joins a small stream which rises at a chalybeate spring just to the south near Sandy Lane and flows northwards through Spa Bottom to the Mole; being chalybeate (i.e. iron-bearing) the spring delivers reddish-coloured water (the 'red bourn' of the charter?). Such springs are a not-unusual feature on this north-facing slope; one is located by Jessop's Well in Princes Coverts due south of Claygate at the same elevation (about 160ft. above sea level).

(vii) The river Mole (Æmenan) is featured as forming a part of the boundary.

The seven points considered above all tally with features existing today in the Esher area and, indeed, if reference is made to a modern large-scale map (say, 2½ inch Ordnance Survey) it will be seen that the features coincide very closely with the major portion of the boundary of the present day parish of Esher.

The inescapable conclusion is that the Æscœre of the 1005 charter is today's Esher in Surrey; the corollary is, of course, that the Dictun of the 983 charter is all, or part of, today's Thames Ditton or Long Ditton or both.

#### Interpreting the bounds of Dictun

The bounds of the Dictun estate given to Ethelmar by Ethelred are less conclusive, in terms of recognisable modern features, than those for Æscœre and at first sight the only identifiable feature is the crane-lake, presumed in the analysis of the AD 1005 charter above to be the pool in Sandown Park.

However, in attempting to trace the boundary quoted in the AD 983 charter, five assumptions may be made:-

- (a) that the estate did not extend to the Thames since no mention of the Thames is made in the bounds
- (b) that the individual features of the boundary are quoted in a clockwise-sequence in plan view, as are the Esher bounds



- (c) that the bounds may coincide wholly or partly with modern parish boundaries
- (d) that some, at least, of the names of boundary features in the charter may persist in some form in present-day names
- (e) that the Dictun estate totalled an area of 9 hides

Armed with these assumptions and a large-scale map we may philosophise on the possible locations of the charter bounds.

(i) "... to the white grove". Due north of the pool in Sandown Park is The Grove and Grove Way; the Esher/Thames Ditton Boundary runs due north here to the Ember, which is the present-day Molesey boundary.

(ii) "... eastwards into the seven fields". Eastwards from the intersection of the Esher/Thames Ditton and the Thames/Molesey parish boundaries is the Imber Court area, a possible location of the seven fields which must have had some special significance (perhaps an unusual feature in an otherwise watery surrounding) to the writer of the charter. An alternative translation of 'æceras' is 'acres' instead of fields, but seven acres approximates to some 34,000 sq. yards e.g. an area 400ft. x 800ft., not a particularly large plot to identify at this distance in time.

(iii) "... to the Emene". If the boundary ran northwards from the Imber Court area to the Mole it would have met the Mole somewhere near the present-day foot-bridge over the river by Bell Road.

(iv) "... to Cyta's ford". In Anglo-Saxon times the river would probably have been wider but, correspondingly, more shallow and so could have been forded at several points, although it now runs reasonably deep except for a stretch across Summer Road where a ford exists to this day; perhaps this is the location of Cyta's ford.

(v) "... to Tata's brook". When the branch line to Hampton Court Station was built in 1849 the railway engineers, in building the raised embankment from the junction up to Summer Road, chose to dig a ditch on the western side of the embankment. However, although the main line from Surbiton to Esher, and beyond, is carried similarly on an embankment no drainage ditch was necessary. The conclusion is that the route of the branch line to Hampton Court was so watery that drainage was essential; it is possible even that in earlier days a natural stream ran in the vicinity from Weston Green to the Mole (although early maps do not record such a stream) and this, perhaps, was Tata's brook.

(vi) "... eastwards to Living Elm's farm. This is the wood". Eastwards from Weston Green leads us to Sugden Road, a farming area of earlier years. Even today there still exist the buildings of Manor Farm, at the Claygate Lane intersection, including the imposing timber barn and it was not all that long ago that the remnants of St. Leonard's Farm were demolished to make way for the Bankside Drive housing development - and St. Leonard's Farm was located at the Thames Ditton/Long Ditton boundary! Certainly this area was heavily wooded with elm until quite recently and the trees on the rising open ground adjacent to the hockey field are perhaps the remains of the wood identified in the charter.

(vii) "... end of the enclosure .... horse-gate .... wide-gate ....". These presumably relate to features of Living Elms farm by which access to meadow land was achieved.

(viii) "... to Cnuc's copse and to Ecga's heath". From the phrasing it may be assumed that these two features were adjacent and related. If the Thames Ditton/Long Ditton boundary is followed due south from Sugden Road then one traverses rising land up to Goat Lane, then fairly flat terrain where the present Kingston By-Pass and Government Offices are located, then rising ground again up to Surbiton Golf Club House. The trees here may be the remnants of Cnuc's copse and the rolling countryside of the Golf Course to the west may once have been Ecga's meadow.

(ix) "... to the hare-willow". The meaning of this term is certainly debatable. A variety of tree? or of plant? It is interesting to note, though, that if a route is followed from the Golf Club House south westerly, skirting Telegraph Hill on its southern flank, one arrives at the Thames Ditton/Esher boundary in the neighbourhood of Hare Lane and a short subsequent journey northwards along the parish boundary would complete a circuit back to the crane-lake in Sandown Park.

(x) For the sequence of present-day geographical features identified above to represent correctly the bounds given in the charter the area enclosed must total nine hides. Two questions arise immediately. With what accuracy could the Anglo-Saxons measure land areas? What did the hide of land represent as an area?

To answer these questions one must look to the standards of measurement current in Anglo-Saxon times. The earliest written reference to land areas would appear to date from the 7th century and relates to the 'yard of land'. The 'gyrde' or lineal yard, from which the 'yard of land' area unit was derived, was not the modern yard of 3 feet but the length of a measuring rod used to space out furrows in ploughing. This 'rod' was later standardized in the Weights and Measures Ordinance of Henry III at 16½ feet (5½ yards) with 40 rods amounting to the length of furrow oxen could plough at one stretch without tiring. This 'furrow-long' or 'furlong' was used to define the acre as one furlong by four rods and thirty acres taken to be the 'yard land', i.e. the size of arable holding normal to the typical husbandman. But it is hard to imagine the basic length unit of the rod being anything like standard throughout England in Saxon times; there must have been many variations, even between adjacent settlements, and the resulting differences in area measurements must have been considerable.

A further complication arises when we tackle the 'hide'. The hide may have started out in life as a land area measurement but developed rapidly into a unit of tax assessment for the king to collect food-rent from the estates of the realm. Obviously, different types and qualities of land produced different returns to their owners and, since the taxes levied were to reflect the profitability of the estates, it follows that the hide must have been a flexible unit and any attempt to equate hides with acres must be tempered with that proviso. It would appear that the equality "one hide equals one hundred and twenty acres" is a fair average definition but considerable variation in this can be detected across the kingdom. In the NE Surrey region, because of the poor nature of the soil in general, it would be reasonable to assume a somewhat higher ratio of acres to the hide and if '130 acres per hide' is selected then the area within the bounds suggested in (i) - (ix) above does indeed approximate to nine hides.

#### Epilogue

The above analysis of the bounds of the Ditton estate detailed in the AD 983 charter is merely pure speculation; if it has any semblance of accuracy the analysis indicates that the estate comprised the substantial central portion of the present-day parish of Thames Ditton and that no part of present-day Long Ditton formed part of Ethelred's grant.



