

SAXON BRANSCOMBE

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Between the defeat of Geraint, the last king of Dumnonia, by the West Saxons under King Ine in 710, and the defeat of King Harold by William of Normandy in 1066, Devon became a Saxon province under Saxon rule. The history of Branscombe during these 356 years is largely a blank. I've tried to fill in some of it, using the few sources available and arguing occasionally from what happened in Branscombe before and afterwards. This means using 'perhaps' and 'probably' too often for the result to count as history, but I have tried to push speculation in the direction of history.

Who owned Branscombe in Saxon times?

The first mention of Branscombe is in King Alfred's will, probably drawn up about 880, but the name must have been older.

Branscombe may have become a royal possession when West Saxons occupied the former British kingdom of Dumnonia in the 8th century. Alfred however owned Branscombe as 'bookland', i.e. as his private property, not as crown property, so he was free to leave it to his younger son Æthelweard. Æthelweard died about 920, and his two sons were killed at the battle of Brunanburh in 937, and their estates reverted to their cousin, King Æthelstan.

Æthelstan then gave Branscombe, along with Sidbury and Salcombe, to the minster, or monastery, of St Peter at Exeter, which he had recently refounded.ⁱ The minster church became a cathedral in 1050, when King Edward the Confessor united the dioceses of Devon and Cornwall under a bishop of Exeter; monks were replaced by priests serving the cathedral, called canons. In 1086 Domesday Book confirmed that the manor of Branscombe belonged to the Bishop of Exeter, and that, together with some others, it was for the support of the canons, known collectively as the Dean and Chapter.

Can the name 'Branscombe' tell us anything about the village's early history?

The name for Branscombe used by King Alfred — *Branecescumb* — combines a British (Celtic) personal name, Branoc, with Anglo-Saxon *cumb* (valley): it means 'Branoc's valley'. The two syllables are combined in an Anglo-Saxon way (a Celtic version would have reversed them, like Cwmbran in Wales), which suggests the name was given by Saxons. So if it originally had a British name (like *Cwm Branoc*) neighbouring Saxon settlers might have adopted this, but in its Anglo-Saxon version, which then became the standard form.

The name suggests that it was the fertile *valleys*, with meadows, reedbeds and sea access, that were the valuable part of the estate.

But who was Branoc? Here are two possibilities:

1. If Branoc was a Dumnonian landowner, the use of his name might indicate that a British community persisted here for a while during the period of Saxon settlement in the early 8th century.

2. Branoc was the name of a sixth-century saint of Welsh origin who founded a monastery at Braunton in north Devon, known in Saxon times as Brannockminster. If this was the Branoc whose name is preserved in *Branecescumb*, this fact might point to an early religious foundation here by St Branoc or one of his disciples, perhaps a monastic cell.

Take your pick. Unfortunately there is no evidence of a British landowner called Branoc, or of any connection between St Branoc and Branscombe, or that the church was ever dedicated to him.

St Branwalader, a red herring.

Another sixth-century Celtic saint whose name has been connected with Branscombe is St Branwalader. John Burges, a Dominican friar in Exeter, told William Worcester in 1479 that St Branwalader's body lay 'in the town of Branston, eight miles from Axminster'. It is thought that Burges must have confused Branscombe with Milton Abbas in Dorset, because King Æthelstan gave Branwalader's relics to Milton Abbey there, when he founded it in 933.ⁱⁱ There is no other mention of Branwalader in connection with Branscombe.

Was there a Saxon church at Branscombe?

The only remnant of Saxon building in Branscombe is some stonework at the base of the church tower.ⁱⁱⁱ Even this is considered doubtful by historians, and Professor Orme does not include Branscombe in his 'provisional list of Devon churches in existence by 1086'.^{iv} Robert Higham, in *Making Anglo-Saxon Devon*, allows only that 'Some commentators have suggested traces of late Saxon work in the base of the ... twelfth-century central tower'. But he also suggests that, if there was a Saxon church at Branscombe, it might have become a sub-minster of Exeter in the 10th or 11th centuries, with a few resident monks.^v

The fact that the Norman church was not built until the 12th century (probably after the Bishop of Exeter had given the manor outright to the Dean and Chapter, in 1148) means that the existence of an earlier church on the site is not really in doubt, even if it was built of cob rather than stone. The question is whether the first church was built before or after the Norman Conquest. It seems likely that after the Bishop of Exeter had acquired Branscombe from King Æthelstan, he would have wanted it to have a church, so there quite probably was one in Saxon times.

Why is the church dedicated to St Winifred?

Winifred, to whom Branscombe church is dedicated, was another seventh-century Welsh saint, but the dedication doesn't necessarily indicate a Welsh connection. St Winifred became a popular saint in the Middle Ages, so the dedication could be medieval, although if so, it has not been recorded.

Elijah Chick, a local historian, wondered if 'Winifred' might be a corruption of an early dedication to St Boniface, a Devon man, under his Saxon name Winfrith, but there is no evidence for this.^{vi}

In the legend of St Winifred, her decapitated head revealed a miraculous spring, known as St Winifred's Well. The first mention of St Winifred as the patron saint of Branscombe is by a visitor in 1742. Professor Orme states that 'A well in Branscombe seems to have been named after Winifred — famous for her well in north Wales — which apparently gave rise to the belief in 1742 that she had been patron of the church.'^{vii} Nineteenth-century maps show a well on the lane above the church, described in evidence before an inquest in 1883 as a 'drinking well'.^{viii} A senior resident remembers it, already overgrown in his youth, but cannot recall it being known as St Winifred's well. This might be the well mentioned by Orme's source, and might explain the dedication, though without giving us its date.

Why is the church where it is?

If we assume that a Saxon church probably did precede the Norman church, on the same site, can its setting in the landscape tell us anything about the Saxon village?

Branscombe church stands on a partly artificial shelf low down on the north side of the western valley. It is a little over half a mile from Street and about 300m from where the valley levels out into the flood plain near Bridge. South of the church, beyond the graveyard and the stream in the valley bottom, the opposite slope rises steeply to a coastal ridge whose cliffs face the sea. The site is narrow, but adequate for a building with an east-west orientation, and a path leads up to the village lane above. The position is somewhat isolated, so why was it chosen? Six considerations:

1. Near to building materials.

There is an old quarry on the upper side of the lane, above the church, which might have provided sandstone for the church. Chalk could have been dug from pits on the hilltop above the quarry and burnt to make lime mortar. But building materials were available elsewhere near the lane, and the first church might not have been built of stone, so this is not the whole explanation.

2. A sacred well?

The legend of St Winifred is similar to the legend of the sixth-century British saint Sidwell of Exeter, and the dedication of St Sidwell's church in Exeter commemorates its foundation near an ancient sacred spring.^{ix} If the dedication of the church to St Winifred because of a local well were supported by an ancient tradition of a sacred well, this might help to explain why an early church was built near it. But no such tradition is known, and the dedication is not mentioned before 1742.

3. An earlier settlement?

The presence of a well suggests there could have been an early settlement nearby, and that the church was built to serve it. Later centuries have seen dwellings built nearby, known collectively as 'Church'. A hall and manor house were built opposite the church in the 12th or 13th century, for the use of Exeter canons, on the site of Church Living and Church Living Cottage, but by then the church already existed. An earlier settlement cannot be ruled out, but there is no evidence for it.

4. Access from different parts of the village?

A simple explanation for the church's location would be the convenience of a position between the hamlets that make up Branscombe. So did Street, Bridge and Square exist in Saxon times?

Square, the most easterly, may also have been the latest hamlet to develop. In recent centuries it was known as 'Vicarage', and it may have grown up around the the vicarage, as 'Church' may have grown around the church. In the Middle Ages the place was known as 'La Forde', indicating that that the stream from the eastern valley was forded by the lane to Beer, and the first vicarage was established at La Forde in 1269. There may well have been a settlement at La Forde by then, but in Saxon times a peasant farm is more likely than a hamlet.

Saxon settlements at Street and Bridge are more probable. For the origin of Street, see the discussion of Domesday Book below. As for Bridge, the outflow of the biggest of Branscombe's three streams into the flood-plain would have been a good reason for settling there. It was called La Brygge in the Middle Ages, so by then the stream had been bridged and the mill was apparently nearby. Domesday Book does not mention a mill at Branscombe, but this does not prove that there wasn't one; even the old smithy at Bridge may have had a Saxon precursor. The church's position between Street and Bridge would have been convenient for both.

6. Hidden from Vikings?

A popular explanation for the church being in the western valley is that the coastal ridge would hide it from Viking raiders. This may have been a consideration, though perhaps not decisive, for the main period of Saxon parish church building was the tenth century, and after 893 Devon enjoyed nearly a century without major Viking attacks. ^x Moreover this would not explain why it was not built at Street, which is even more secluded, being higher up the valley, yet has some level sites.

Of these six possible explanations, the choice of a position between Street and Bridge seems likely, and would weigh in favour of these having been Saxon hamlets if we were sure there was a Saxon church. The precise choice may or may not have been due to an earlier settlement nearby, with or without a holy well, given that building materials were at hand. Concealment from Vikings was perhaps effect rather than cause.

Was Branscombe a parish in Saxon times?

There is no mention of the 'parish of Branscombe' in the few Saxon documents that survive. If there were, it would prove there was a church. The main development of parishes and parish churches, often based on aristocratic estates, took place in the tenth century.

Branscombe lies hidden from the surrounding country, enclosed in valleys scored into a high plateau. It seems likely that from early times its contained and secluded character would have made it a single community bounded by the sea on the south and on the north by a prehistoric ridgeway track. These were probably the boundaries of King Alfred's estate. Later, they became Branscombe's parish boundaries, but we don't know when.

Along the ridgeway track (now the A3052) stood old marker stones, of which the Hangman's Stone survives, marking where Branscombe parish met Seaton (now Beer) on the east. In the west stood the so-called Bound Stone, 'upon wch stone a man may Lay his Belly with his right hand in Branscom, his left hand in Colyton & his foot in Salcom' according to a road map of 1728. These may have been Saxon

stones, or they may have been earlier waymarks used by the Saxons to demarcate either the estate or the parish of Branscombe, or both.

The stretch of road between them was known in the eighteenth century as 'Raddis Lane'. This came from a name, probably meaning 'reedy ditch', given by the Saxons to an Iron Age earthwork built across the ridge to bar the road, probably in the 2nd or 1st century BCE, to protect Blackbury Camp. It gave its name 'Redix' to a small Saxon estate north of the road, recorded in Domesday Book.^{xi}

It is safe to say that if Branscombe had a church in later Saxon times, its parish boundary would have run (as in the Middle Ages, and today) along the Exeter-Lyme Regis road, from Paccombe Pool to the Hangman Stone, from Paccombe Pool to Weston Mouth in the west, and from the Hangman Stone by way of Balin's Mound (a prehistoric barrow) to the sea in the east.

Did Branscombe expand from the west?

The situation of the church suggests that there might have been Saxon settlements at Street and Bridge which it was built to serve. But why should early settlement have been in the western valley?

One possible reason is that the earliest centres of protection and power in Branscombe were on the high ground to the west. In unstable times, people will probably settle in or near defensible places, while more stable conditions, coming later, would encourage settlement to spread to places favourable to agriculture. But the power to protect would remain with whoever controlled the original base. This model would suggest that Branscombe might have expanded eastwards down the western valley.

The first centre of protection and power at Branscombe was Bury Camp, the rectangular enclosure on the cliff above Berry Barton farm, high up between the head of the western valley and the sea. The names of Bury Camp and Berry Barton preserve the Anglo-Saxon word *burh*, a fortress, showing that the Saxons appreciated the earthwork's defensive potential. A map of 1763 labelled its eastern and western ramparts 'Two Saxon intrenchments'.^{xii} It was actually much older, pre-Roman, dating from the Iron Age or earlier.^{xiii}

After the Iron Age, a Romano-British presence, possibly a villa, was established near the Camp. This is shown by a high-status burial in a sarcophagus of Beer stone from the 2nd or 3rd century, containing a bronze *fibula* (brooch), beside the road leading west from Berry Barton; by a 3rd-century coin of Victorinus found near the Camp; and a 4th-century coin found on the beach below the cliff.^{xiv} If high-status occupation continued near Bury Camp after the Romans left, Branoc himself, if he was a British landowner, might have lived here later.

We know that later in the Middle Ages, 'La Biry' was the home farm of the manor, from which the canons' bailiff organised the serfs' work on their demesne. Thus the valley was dominated from this area in pre-Roman, Roman and medieval times. This makes it likely the home farm of the Saxon estate was here too, and that King Alfred's bailiff, or the bishop's bailiff later, may also have lived near Berry Barton. But the archaeological investigations that might decide such questions are yet to be undertaken.

Was Branscombe attacked by Vikings?

The Saxons may have had to use Bury Camp defensively, if only as a lookout for hostile ships, but there is no direct evidence of a Viking raid. The first recorded attack near Branscombe was in 876, when Danes captured Exeter and held it for a year, and in 893 Exeter was attacked again. The coasts of Devon were harried in 981, and although East Devon seems to have escaped the Danish invasion of South Devon in 997, some parts suffered during the repulsion of the Danes from Exeter in 1001.

Branscombe was probably more affected after the destruction of Exeter and sack of the minster by Swegn's Danish forces in 1003, when the monks fled to London. Danish rule under Canute followed, from 1016 to 1035. When Bishop Leofric established the combined see of Devon and Cornwall at Exeter in 1050, he found that all the lands formerly belonging to the minster, except for Ide, had been alienated.^{xv} He managed to recover them for the cathedral, Branscombe included, with its neighbours Salcombe and Sidbury, by purchase or litigation. But it is not known who held the lordship of Branscombe during the intervening years, nor whether Danes took over the village or settled in it. A record, dated about 1100, of a guild or burial club at Woodbury, further west, patronised by the canons of the cathedral, lists both Danish and Saxon names.^{xvi} This suggests that Danes and Saxons had learned to co-exist after the Norman Conquest, which might have been necessary in Branscombe too.

How big was the Saxon home farm?

In the Middle Ages the manor owned as its demesne a large compact farm of some 500 acres containing all the land between the coast and the lane linking the three hamlets, *i.e.* the whole flood plain, the western valley south of the lane, the coastal ridge which sheltered it, and a swathe of high ground continuing from the ridge westwards and inland around La Biry (Berry Barton) — a southern tranche of the parish that contained most of the best land. All this was 'barton land'; outside it, to the east, north and west, lay 'native land', leased to villeins or serfs with obligations to work on the demesne, and to a few freeholders.

Organisation on this scale is not found before the Norman Conquest. The population of Branscombe was much smaller, too small to work so large an area. But the Saxon estate, whose function was to feed its owners — first Alfred's royal household, then the monks of St Peter's, finally the canons of Exeter cathedral — would have been divided in a similar way. On Saxon estates, the nearest thing to the Norman demesne was the *inland*, a 'home farm' which contained its own dependent labour force of tenant smallholders. Outside this lay *warland*, tenanted by free peasants who may also have had some obligation to work on the inland.^{xvii}

At Branscombe, the inland would have included the main farmstead, situated perhaps where Berry Barton stood later, with arable land around it, and with some of the coastal ridge and the western valley below. It may once have included the area in the western valley where the hamlet of Street lies in a basin of level ground supplied with three springs, and land lower in the western valley, from which ground was allocated for the churchyard.

What does Domesday Book tell us about Saxon Branscombe?

In 1086 William the Conqueror sent out officials to make a valuation of his new kingdom, and Domesday Book, which they compiled, recorded who held what manors, who had held them before William's invasion in 1066, and what were their

taxable resources. The picture it presents can be cautiously applied to the last years of Saxon rule as well as to what they found in 1086. It is the first account of Branscombe that we possess. It says:

The Bishop holds Branscombe himself. Before 1066 it paid tax for 5 hides. Land for 16 ploughs. In lordship (*in dominio*) 1 plough and 1 hide, with 1 slave; 22 villagers (*villani*) and 5 smallholders (*bordarii*) with 15 ploughs and 4 hides. Meadow, 2 acres; underwood, 12 acres. 1 animal; 150 sheep. Value £6. It is for the canons' supplies.^{xviii}

Five hides appears to be an estimate of the total taxable farmland in the manor, inland and warland together, of which four hides were held by tenants and one hide was *in dominio*. This Latin phrase, translated here as 'lordship'. i.e in the hands of the lord, corresponds to the Norman-French *demesne*, and approximates to the meaning of Anglo-Saxon *inland*, the home or manor farm.

Counting a hide as 120 acres, as is usual, some 600 acres were farmed, 120 of them being in the home farm. These farmed areas were much smaller than in the later medieval manor. The home farm of 120 acres contrasts with the medieval demesne of 500 acres (in 1339, the best recorded year). The 480 acres left over for the Saxon villagers (*villani*) compares with about 620 acres supporting the villeins (also *villani*) in 1339, by which time other cleared land was also being farmed by freehold tenants.

But the smaller cultivated area was more generously distributed in Saxon times. The 22 Saxon villagers could have had holdings of over 21 acres each, and there was plenty more land, not taxed, to be cleared or used in common. This compares very favourably with the average holding of the 75 villeins in 1339, which was only about 8 acres, with much less common and waste.

The five smallholders (*bordarii*) belonged to a class of tenants with small holdings who made up the main labour-force of the manor farm.^{xix} The word 'bordar' was new at the time, and often designated dependent farmworkers whose smallholdings were inside the inland. Here, however, they are reckoned as part of the tenantry of the four hides outside the inland. *Could this be the origin of Street: a hamlet of dependent smallholding labourers on the edge of the inland, just below Berry Barton?* Once, perhaps, their ancestors might have been settled with small plots in the inland; now apparently the inland boundary was drawn to exclude them, as became normal on Norman manors. The only resident worker of the inland was the slave, presumably a ploughman.

The twenty-two Saxon *villani*, villagers or villeins, were descendants of the free warland tenants of the past. Their farmsteads would have been scattered in the hills and valleys outside the inland. One or two, for example, might well have been near La Forde. By 1086 they may have had some labour obligations on the inland, or the Norman demesne as it was then becoming, and *their* descendants would become serfs in the Middle Ages.

Domesday not only records 16 ploughs (*i.e.* ploughs with teams of 8 oxen each) — one in demesne and 15 owned by villeins and bordars — but also says that 'there is land for 16 ploughs'. This matching of plough-teams to ploughland implies that all the cleared arable land was in cultivation, unlike some manors where amounts of ploughland were noted in excess of the number of ploughs, showing that available arable was left untilled.^{xx}

Domesday also lists '2 acres of meadow and 12 acres of scrubland',^{xxi} small figures that must surely refer only to meadow and scrubland within the home farm. Two acres of meadow again illustrates the small size of the farm, for the later

medieval demesne contained some 8 acres of meadow in the flood-plain. The scrubland might have been on the coastal ridge.

Branscombe's entry in Domesday Book could indeed depict a Saxon home farm before it became the full-blown medieval demesne of which we have fairly good records. But this has to be a tentative conclusion, because the meaning of the terms used and the accuracy of the estimates in Domesday are unclear and disputed; also, as has been well said, 'Domesday Book is a fixed picture of a society which was going through profound changes'.^{xxii}

Conclusion

Such as it is, Domesday's evidence for a fairly small Saxon manor farm, if taken as referring to a site at or near Berry Barton, is compatible with the idea that the valley-system at Branscombe was gradually colonised from an early nucleus of power and settlement on the western high ground. When inferences from the siting of a putative Saxon church are added, a Saxon inland can be tentatively located in and above the western valley, with Street housing the labour force and perhaps with water-power in use at a settlement at Bridge. Street and Bridge may have been the only hamlets in existence. Peasant farms would have been dispersed in the valleys and on the hillsides of the 'warland'; the land as a whole would have been lightly exploited and heavily wooded.^{xxiii}

This history is 'mere' story-telling. But the story it tells could be useful if traces of Saxon Branscombe are found by archaeologists, and like any worthwhile theory, it can be put to the test.

Notes

i Orme (2009) 7-10.

ii See Orme (1992) 118-120

iii Prideaux (1912-13) 2-4.

iv Orme (2011) 29-34. Domesday Book recorded churches only if they owned land. If there was a Saxon church at Branscombe it would have been supported by tithes.

v Higham (2008) 88, 125.

vi Chick (1906) 30.

vii Orme (1996) 136.

viii Farquharson & Torrance (2009) 35.

ix St Sidwell's, like Branscombe, belonged to Exeter cathedral from Saxon times. Orme (2009) 10, 75-6.

x Hoskins (1978) 52-53.

xi Torrance (2008) 56-7.

xii Ravenhill & Rowe (2002) 95. The map is reproduced by permission of the Devon Record Office at www.branscombeproject.org.uk

xiii Devon Historic Environment Record No. 10899. It has never been excavated.

xiv Butler (2000) 117-118. Oriented north-south, the burial is perhaps 3rd century. See M.A. thesis by M. Kingdom, 'An Investigation into Antiquarian Acquired Human Remains Held at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter'. Victorinus: T. Hibbert, pers. comm. 4th century coin: M. Rayner and T. Cadbury (RAMM) pers. comm. A Roman farm in a similar coastal position on Beer Head was revealed by excavation in 2011.

xv Conner (1993) 226-31. The monks of St Peter's minster fled in 1003.

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- ^{xvi} A guild at Woodbury of which the canons of the cathedral were patrons in the time of Bishop Leofric or his successor listed some Danish names among the Saxon names of its members. Brighthouse (1981) 27-29.
- ^{xvii} Faith (1997) 49, ch. 3 *passim*.
- ^{xviii} Morris (1985) Part 1, 102a.
- ^{xix} Faith (1997) 70-74.
- ^{xx} Faith (1997) 183.
- ^{xxi} Williams & Martin (2003) Vol. 1, 284.
- ^{xxii} Faith (1997).
- ^{xxiii} The landscape lacked a feature that characterised the village during post-Norman centuries: apple orchards were apparently unknown in Saxon Devon.

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