

Introduction

The year 2016 marked one thousand years since the first written reference to Staffordshire.¹ To observe the nine-hundredth anniversary, Bridgeman and Wedgwood produced perhaps the most comprehensive historical work on the county for the early medieval period, the 1916 volume of the Staffordshire Record Society.² As part of their study they undertook a detailed survey of the Anglo-Saxon charters of Staffordshire (some of which have subsequently been attributed to other places in the country) and included thoughts on place-names and topography. Perhaps now, a hundred years later, we may hope that the millennial anniversary will focus a little more attention on the often overlooked early medieval history of Staffordshire. Certainly the finding of the Staffordshire Hoard in 2009 (the most spectacular archaeological find from Staffordshire for the period near Hammerwich) generated renewed interest in the county. Those finds captured the imagination of people across the region and beyond. The ‘hoard’ has toured the USA and so great was the number of individual artefacts found that two regional museums have shared the finds to put on permanent display. However, despite the interest and the gains in scholarship made concerning the artefacts themselves with particular regard to their provenance, dating and assemblage, these dazzling finds continue to lack local context and have, so far at least, been unable to reveal very much about Staffordshire or the people who lived there.³

In general the early medieval history of the area that became known as Staffordshire is usually, if at all, referred to within the wider context of the kingdom of Mercia. Mercia has a good survival rate for charters but lacks the written testimonies of writers that other kingdoms have such as Bede (Northumbria) or Asser (Wessex). In part, at least, it is for this reason that it receives less attention than other kingdoms of the period. Capper has commented that ‘known through the sources of its neighbours, Mercia is prominent as a protagonist in Anglo-Saxon affairs, but is often studied for its effect on others’.⁴

As for Mercia itself, research has shown that it may never have been a completely cohesive unit; the level of variation and complexity of relationships across the kingdom are as yet not fully understood. Brown and Farr’s 2001

volume on Mercia⁵ is the most recent and comprehensive academic publication concerning the kingdom, preceded in the 1970s by Dornier’s *Mercian Studies*.⁶ Both offer a series of papers that have helped focus attention on one of the most important and yet neglected kingdoms of the early medieval period. And yet Brown and Farr’s map of Mercia does not show any Staffordshire places (the blank area to the west on Figure. 1). Nor does the volume index Staffordshire, Stafford, or mention any of the Staffordshire stone sculpture or any of the saints associated with the county, apart from a single entry for Chad (Tamworth and Lichfield do, however, feature). This valuable work instead concentrates its interests to the south and east of the kingdom. That said, much of the county, in particular the south-eastern section, has become central to our understanding of Mercia. Tamworth is sometimes referred to as the ‘capital’ of Mercia, Lichfield was the Episcopal See of the Mercians and nearby Repton (Derbyshire, some

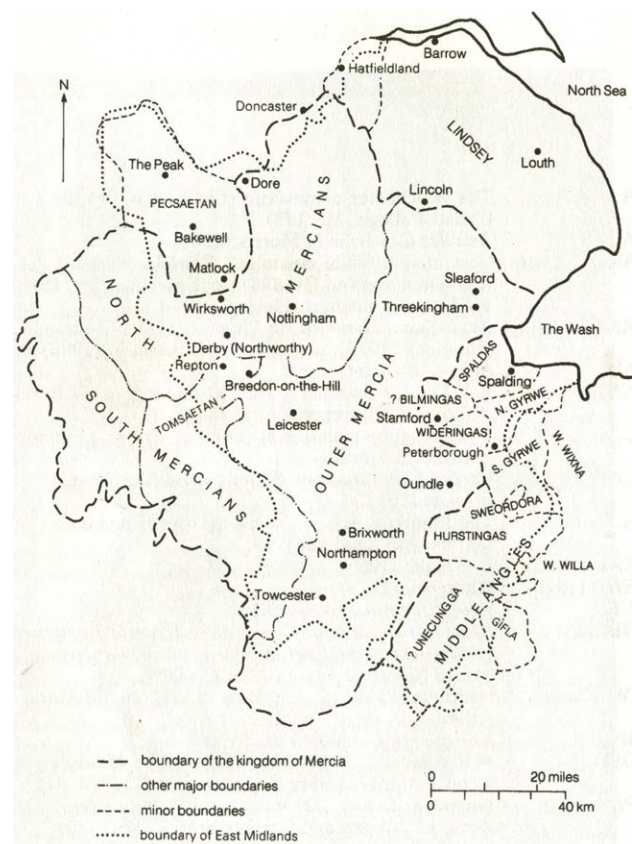


Figure 1. Mercia as described by Brown and Farr.⁷

¹ G. Garmonsway (trans. and ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1953, Guernsey, 1994 reprint), p. 147. The county itself is likely to be older. ‘Staffordshire’ will be used as the point of reference throughout this study although most of the period under discussion will be from the period prior to 1016.

² C. Bridgeman and J. Wedgwood (eds), *Collections for a History of Staffordshire, 1916* (London, 1918), due to the war it finally came out in 1918.

³ S. Dean, D. Hooke and A. Jones, ‘The Staffordshire hoard: the fieldwork’, *The Antiquaries Journal*, 90 (2010), pp. 139–152.

⁵ M. Brown and C. Farr (eds), *Mercia; An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001).

⁶ A. Dornier, *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977).

⁷ Brown and Farr, *Mercia*, map facing p.1.

four miles from Staffordshire) acted as a Mercian royal mausoleum, completing a triangle that makes what has been termed the ‘Mercian heartland’.⁸ The name Mercia implies ‘dwellers of the march’; probably PrWelsh in origin, it gave the meaning border or boundary, perhaps from the region’s relationship to the native British kingdoms to the west.⁹ This ‘edginess’ is a theme that will recur throughout this study and is useful here to also reflect Staffordshire’s place on the periphery of discussions of the period. For despite its importance, beyond Lichfield and the two *burhs* of Stafford and Tamworth, Anglo-Saxon Staffordshire as a county has received restrained interest from scholars of the period.

The first written reference to a place within what was later known as Staffordshire is the mention of a bishop and monks at *Caer Lwytgoed*, identified as Letocetum (a Roman and later Romano-British settlement at Wall near Lichfield) in a Welsh poem *Marwnad Cynddylan* (‘Lament for Cynddylan’, c. 655). This has led to the suggestion that the see of Lichfield was British in origin, with Letocetum understood as the precursor to Lichfield. It was only some 30 years after this date that Lichfield was described as a suitable place for a new bishopric.¹⁰ The important centre of Tamworth may have begun as a significant meeting place for the various Mercian tribes, emerging ‘as a royal centre in order to encourage unity as the authority of the Mercian kings developed in the eighth-century’.¹¹ It was the major royal Mercian centre by the end of the eighth-century, and was ‘more like a “capital” than any other English place before the 10th-century’.¹² The tendency is for ‘Staffordshire’ within a Mercian framework to be reduced to what is seen as its most important early medieval centres, namely Tamworth (especially for the earliest period), Lichfield (the ecclesiastical centre), and to a lesser extent Stafford (as a royal *burh* and later shire town): these are certainly the places that have attracted the interest of archaeologists.¹³ Beyond the urban centres gravel extraction along the Trent Valley and the subsequent finds such as those at



Figure 2. The hundreds of Staffordshire.

Catholme have further emphasised an eastern bias in discussions about the county.¹⁴

A major thrust behind the motivation for this volume is that without developing ideas about life in early medieval Staffordshire beyond these centres, our understanding of Mercia will always remain incomplete. This volume seeks to redress this imbalance and will concentrate mainly on rural centres, away from the main *burhs* with a particular focus on one of Staffordshire’s five hundreds, namely Pirehill. This is an area that remains firmly on the periphery of thoughts on the period. Pirehill Hundred covers some 314 sq. miles and takes its name from a hill near Walton in Stone parish. The river Trent flows from the north of the hundred in a south-easterly direction, whilst the river Sow rises near Eccleshall and flows past Stafford. The hundred is some 28 miles in length and at its maximum 20 in breadth. It is bounded by Cheshire to the north-east and Shropshire to the east. Within Staffordshire it abuts the hundred of Totmanslow to the north-east, Offlow to the east and Cuttlestone to the south. Within Pirehill, the *burh* of Stafford has received most attention. Usually considered within a framework of the 10th-century campaigns of Æthelred and Æthelflaed it has also, due to various developments, received archaeological interest which has advanced our understanding of the area. The growth of

⁸ S. Bassett, ‘Divide and rule? The military infrastructure of eighth- and ninth-century Mercia’, *Early Medieval Europe*, 15 (1) (2007), at p.# pp. 57–85.

⁹ Most recently D. Hill, ‘Mercians: The Dwellers on the Boundary’, in M. Brown and C. Farr (eds), *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001), pp. 173–182, but also S. Bassett, ‘Medieval Lichfield: a topographical review’, *Transactions of the South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 22 (Walsall, 1981), pp. 93–121, D. Kirby, ‘Welsh bards and the border’, in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 31–42, and T. Charles-Edwards, ‘Wales and Mercia, 613–918’, in Brown and Farr (eds), *Mercia*, pp. 89–105; and N. Brooks, ‘The formation of the Mercian kingdom’, in S. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London, 1989), p. 160.

¹⁰ J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), p. 99.

¹¹ N. Tringham, ‘Administrative areas’, in A. Phillips and C. Phillips (eds), *An Historical Atlas* (Manchester, 2011), p. 10.

¹² Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 277ff.

¹³ For example, D. Garner, ‘Archaeological evaluation at Salter Street’, *Earthworks Archaeological Services* (Stafford, 1994), or P. Rahtz and R. Meeson, ‘An Anglo-Saxon watermill at Tamworth’, *CBA Research Report*, 83 (London, 1983).

¹⁴ Catholme is discussed in chapter one, but see also S. Beteux and H. Chapman, ‘Where rivers meet. The archaeology of Catholme and the Trent-Tame confluence’, *CBA Research Report*, 161 (York, 2009), and S. Losco-Bradley and G. Kinsley, *Catholme, An Anglo-Saxon Settlement on the Trent Gravels in Staffordshire* (Nottingham, 2002).



Figure 3. Sites referenced in the most recent work on early medieval rural settlement.¹⁵

Stafford has mostly been thought to owe its origins to the 10th-century foundation of the Æthelfladian *burh*.¹⁶ More recent research has been carried out on the county, and for Stafford the development of the site has been pushed back into the late eighth- or early ninth-century. This research has shown that Stafford was the centre for a sophisticated pottery industry producing what is known as ‘Stafford ware’.¹⁷ Given the focus and detail of this recent work on Stafford and this present study’s emphasis on ‘rural’ estates, Stafford itself will not be examined in any great depth, although because of its importance to the region it will be referred to throughout the work. Of the minor sites Catholme in the east of the county is the only place to have received large-scale archaeological excavation and remains by far the best researched. Within the study of rural settlements, however, Catholme is one of a few

western outliers discussed within a corpus of sites that lie to the east (both north and south).

The relief and drainage map taken from *An Historical Atlas of Staffordshire* (figure 4) highlights another major theme in this volume, that is, one of ‘wateriness’. However, even from this modern map it is difficult for us to get a sense of just how watery the landscape was in the early medieval period. Physical evidence survives for historic water management systems at Croxden abbey (Totmonslow), the largest Cistercian house in Staffordshire, and also from the Roman period at Wall where Roman baths have been found and where a long wooden aqueduct some 500 metres in length was reported by Stebbing Shaw in 1798.¹⁸

We also have evidence of the loss of many natural watery landscapes, such as this example at Shebdon Moss in Norbury manor (Cuttlestone), where drainage led to the end of the annual rounding up of pewits (lapwings).

Other instances are documented, perhaps the best being the drainage of Doxey Marshes north of Stafford and the Kings Pools to the east which began in 1798. The Kings Pools were dry by 1606 but were re-flooded as part of the town’s civil war defences, re-creating the same defensive shield that presumably encouraged the building of the Æthelfladian *burh* in 913.¹⁹

The age of agricultural improvement brought about great changes to the Staffordshire landscape, its heavy clay soils having spawned the pottery industry, whilst Joseph Elkington, the great land drainage pioneer, moved to ‘Bog Farm’ in Madeley, one suspects as a retirement project.²⁰ This process of drainage continued well into the modern era; Loynton Moss has now been reduced from five mosses and meres to just one, a development that continued up until 1969.²¹

In general the western part of the British Isles receives more rain on average than the eastern half of the country. During the period AD 400–900 the climate in Britain was both colder and wetter than the period that had preceded it (and compared to the current climate).²² It was a period when wetter westerlies dominated the weather.²³ The evidence suggests that during the period under discussion

¹⁵ H. Hamerow, *Rural Settlements and Society in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2012), p. 4. Catholme is shown as ‘11’ on the map and Tamworth as ‘69’.

¹⁶ M. Carver, *The Birth of a Borough: An Archaeological Study of Anglo-Saxon Stafford* (Woodbridge, 2010).

¹⁷ A. Dodd, J. Goodwin, S. Griffiths, A. Norton, C. Poole and S. Teague, ‘Excavations at Tipping Street, Stafford, 2009–10’, *Transactions of Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 47 (Stafford, 2014), for Lichfield, Bassett, *Medieval Lichfield*, pp. 93–121, and a wider view A. Sargent, ‘Lichfield and the lands of St Chad’ (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Keele University, 2012); J. Gould, ‘Saint Edith of Polesworth and Tamworth’, *South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions*, 27 (Walsall, 1987) pp. 35–38; J. Gould and D. Gould, ‘St Michael’s churchyard, Lichfield’, *South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions*, 16 (Kendall, 1975), pp. 58–61; and J. Gould, *Lichfield: Archaeology and Development*, West Midlands Rescue Archaeology Committee (Birmingham, 1976).

¹⁸ S. Shaw, *The Histories and Antiquities of Staffordshire*, 2 vols (1798, Staffordshire, 1976 reprint), 1, p. 19; and M. Leah, C. Wells, P. Stamper, E. Huckerby and C. Welch, *The Wetlands of Shropshire and Staffordshire* (Lancaster, 1998), pp. 113–117. Appendix 8 of this volume lists *A Gazetteer of Staffordshire environmental archives* which includes a small site just north of Eccleshall, p. 205.

¹⁹ Leah, Wells, Stamper, Huckerby and Welch, *Wetlands of Shropshire and Staffordshire*, p. 113.

²⁰ For water meadows and their management in the early medieval period see T. Williamson, *Environment, Society and Landscape in Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 184–206

²¹ Leah, Wells, Stamper, Huckerby and Welch, *Wetlands of Shropshire and Staffordshire*, pp. 107–108.

²² J. Kington, *Climate and Weather* (London, 2010), p. 6, 135.

²³ The ‘indicators show that the Icelandic low deepened sometime after 600, which, in association with an inferred intensification of the Azores high, may have resulted in one of the strongest westerly periods in historic times’. Kington, *Climate and Weather*, p. 137.

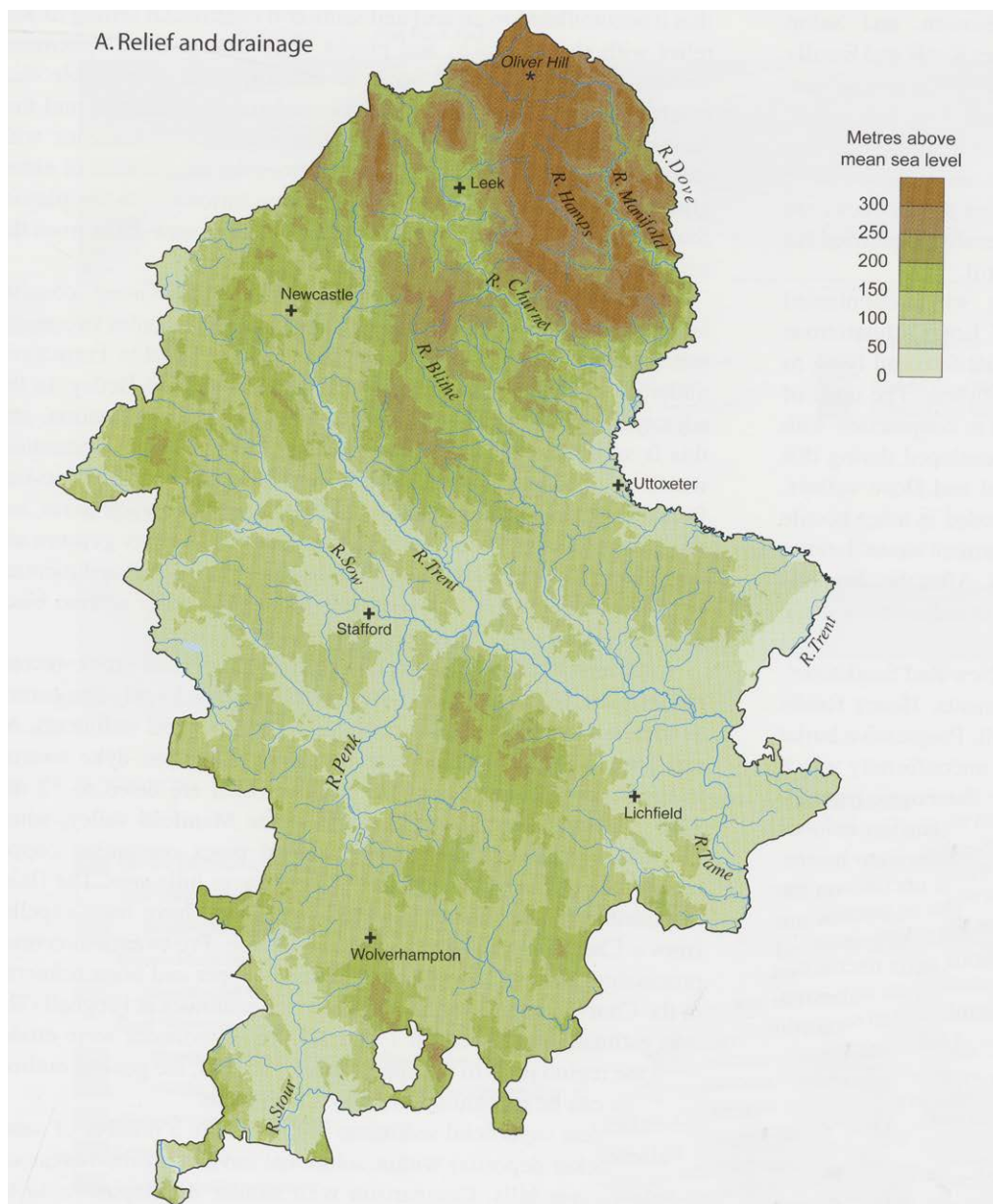


Figure 4. Staffordshire: relief and drainage.²⁴

a wetter landscape was present in Staffordshire (and across the continent) and that during the 10th-century the climate warmed, coinciding with, and contributing to, a time of economic expansion. This volume proposes that it was here, on the edge of watery landscapes, that early medieval settlements were established.

Historiography

The main documentary evidence for early medieval Staffordshire is principally found within 23 charters and documents from the pre-Conquest period. The majority relate to the holdings of Burton abbey and the minster church at Wolverhampton, both associated with the family of Wulfrun (see chapter five). They date primarily from

the 10th and 11th-centuries. Hooke's work on the charter bounds of Staffordshire represents the most comprehensive examination of the written record for the county and has the additional benefit of taking us away from the major centres described above.²⁵ The lives of the saints associated with Staffordshire, often written much later, refer on occasion to places within what became the county and these saints are usually our first recognisable characters of the period (see chapter two).

The Domesday Survey provides information about the estates of Staffordshire and offers, along with the charters, the baseline data for many of the place-names of the county.²⁶ The study of place-names of Staffordshire received some early attention with Duignan's *Notes of*

²⁴ A. Phillips and C. Phillips (eds), *An Historical Atlas* (Manchester, 2011), p. 3 (reproduced by kind permission of Manchester University Press and A.D.M. Phillips).

²⁵ D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon Staffordshire: the Charter Evidence* (Keele, 1983).

²⁶ J. Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book: Staffordshire* (Chichester, 1976).



Figure 5. Pewits drive on Shebben (Shebdon) Pool.²⁷

Staffordshire Place-Names in 1902.²⁸ Although the *EPNS* has published only one volume for Staffordshire, Horovitz has provided the first comprehensive modern survey of the county.²⁹ A broad landscape study has been offered by Palliser covering the early medieval period into the modern era, whilst Gelling attempted a synthesis of the early medieval period across the West Midlands which included Staffordshire.³⁰ The *VCH* has been quite industrious producing 14 volumes to date. In addition we have seen the publication of *An Historical Atlas of Staffordshire* which covers the county through a wide range of thematic studies.³¹ The county has been well served by antiquarian interest from the 16th-century onwards. The works of Erdeswick, Chetwynd, Plot and Shaw mirrored antiquarian interest found elsewhere in the country.³² This was later supplemented by more local interests such as Hackwood's studies of south Staffordshire towns and Willmore's history of Walsall.³³ The interest of the banker William Salt led to the formation of the William Salt Library (1872) and the Staffordshire Record Society (1879).³⁴ For the early medieval period we return to Wedgwood, who in 1916 understood the 'arrival' of the Anglo-Saxons as meaning that 'the rulers changed, but it was a shadowy rule; the

landowners changed, but they were often absentees; the Saxon masters managed even to change the language in time'. For Wedgwood what remained was the 'Celtic provincialism of Staffordshire'.³⁵ Drawing allusions from the political world of his time he went on to explain:

'In Staffordshire they talked Welsh in the time of Penda, probably well down to the time of the Conqueror; but they left no mark on the map than have the Kafirs on the map of South Africa.'³⁶

It seems a hundred years ago historians were perplexed by the relative silence of early medieval Staffordshire. For her part Gelling thought, much like Wedgwood, that the place-names of Staffordshire showed 'evidence for the coexistence between Welsh and English speaking people'.³⁷ For many good reasons this study avoids deliberating on ideas of ethnic origins or the make-up of tribal groups, and within archaeology there has been a general pulling back from the use of material culture to discuss or define ethnicities.³⁸ Furthermore, recent studies in linguistics and place-names offer reasons to be cautious about using place-names or material culture to define ethnicity.³⁹ Current thinking around the construction and multiple layering of social identities warns us against generalising and over-simplifying these issues.⁴⁰ Just what an 'Anglo-Saxon' was in the north-west of Staffordshire, certainly for

²⁷ WSL, SV-IV.324b taken from R. Plot, *The Natural History of Staffordshire* (1686, Oxford).

²⁸ W. Duignan, *Notes of Staffordshire Place-names* (London, 1902).

²⁹ J. Oakden, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1, Cuttlestone Hundred*, *EPNS* (Nottingham, 1984). D. Horovitz, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire* (Brewood, 2005) also provides an overview of previous place-name scholars' work on Staffordshire, pp. i-iii.

³⁰ D. Palliser, *The Staffordshire Landscape* (London, 1976); M. Gelling, *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1992).

³¹ Phillips and Phillips, *Historical Atlas*.

³² For a concise history of the county's historians from the middle ages onwards see M. Greenslade, *The Staffordshire Historians*, Collections for a History of Staffordshire (Fenton, 1982); more specifically: T. Harwood (ed.), *Sampson Erdeswick's Survey of Staffordshire* (Westminster, 1820); Plot, *Natural History*, chapter 10, 34, p. 414; Shaw, *Histories and Antiquities*; F. Parker, *Chetwynd's History of Pirehill Hundred, With Notes*, Collections for a History of Staffordshire, new series, 12 (London, 1909).

³³ For example, F. Hackwood, *A History of West Bromwich* (Birmingham, 1895); F. Hackwood, *The Annals of Willenhall* (Wolverhampton, 1908); and F. Willmore, *A History of Walsall* (Walsall, 1887).

³⁴ For a detailed study of the antiquarian interest in Staffordshire from the medieval period onwards see Greenslade, *Staffordshire Historians*.

³⁵ J. Wedgwood, *Early Staffordshire History*, Collections for a History of Staffordshire, 1916 (London, 1918), pp. 138–208.

³⁶ Wedgwood, 'Early Staffordshire History', p. 143.

³⁷ Gelling, *West Midlands*, p. 59.

³⁸ M. Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1999); but more specifically V. Thompson, *Death and Dying in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (2004, Woodbridge, 2012 reprint); and H. Williams, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Cambridge, 2006).

³⁹ H. Tristram, 'Why don't the English speak Welsh', in N. Higham (ed.), *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 215–230. M. Blake, 'W(e)alh tūn: balancing the probabilities', in R. Jones and S. Semple (eds), *Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England* (Donington, 2012).

⁴⁰ W. Frazer, 'Introduction: identities in early medieval Britain', in W. Frazer and A. Tyrell (eds), *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain* (London, 2000), pp. 1–22; B. Yorke, 'Political and Ethnic Identity', Frazer and Tyrell, *Social Identity*, pp. 69–90.

the early and middle periods under discussion, is elusive and difficult to define.⁴¹ That is not to say these issues have been shied away from here: ideas around identity, memorialisation, ancestry, belonging, image and power are central components of this study.

‘Staffordshire’ is not recorded before 1016 when it first appears in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.⁴² It is likely that the shire came into being during the 10th-century under the administrative reforms of Æthelred and Æthelflaed. The county seems to be a political construct but may have been based, in part at least, on pre-existing land units. For Palliser, however, it was a subdivision of Mercia, created ‘so far as is known, without any reference to previous units of government’.⁴³ The multiple estates described in the Domesday Survey at Eccleshall and those of Lichfield (Offlow Hundred) and Penkrige (Cuttlestone Hundred), for example, do seem to suggest earlier foundations. Eccleshall (Pirehill Hundred) is shown as a multi-vill estate held by the bishop and it remained in the bishop’s hands throughout the medieval period, and the place-name evidence seems to suggest an early association with the church. Further evidence of its stability is shown by the boundaries that respect the estate, bounded to the south by the hundredal boundary and to the west the county boundary. Penkrige is shown as a large multi-vill royal estate, the place-name incorporates Welsh elements and is associated with *Pennocrucio* in the Roman Antonine Itinerary. It is also associated with the folk group *Pencersæten* mentioned in 849 (S.1272).⁴⁴ Lichfield is associated with the nearby Roman settlement at Wall and its (later) early medieval history. St Chad according to Bede ‘had his episcopal seat at a place called Lichfield’ and it remained the centre of the bishops’ estates for most of the medieval period and beyond.⁴⁵ Once formed, the county remained fairly stable for around one thousand years.⁴⁶ Staffordshire is almost 40 miles wide and over 60 miles in length. It has a diversity of landscapes, the moorlands rising over 500m in the north descending to 50m where the rivers Dove and Trent meet.⁴⁷ There are wide fertile flood plains and we know that by the time of the Domesday Survey the amount of woodland was ‘considerable’ and the extents of the forests in Staffordshire by the time we have their bounds in the 12th- and 13th-centuries show large areas of the county under forest jurisdiction.⁴⁸

⁴¹ See also Capper, ‘Contested Loyalties’.

⁴² ‘The prince Edmund rode to Northumbria to earl Uhtred, and everybody imagined that they would collect levies to oppose king but they went into Staffordshire, and to Shrewsbury and to Chester and harried on their side’: *ASC*, p. 147.

⁴³ Palliser, *Staffordshire Landscape*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ Horovitz, *Place-Names*, pp. 21–23.

⁴⁵ B. Colgrave and R. Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), p. 337, book IV, 3.

⁴⁶ ‘Although it quickly shed some peripheral areas, and subsequently the detached parishes of Broom and Clent in 1844, and did not acquire Dudley until 1966, the county’s shape remained essentially unchanged until the local government reforms of 1974’: Phillips and Phillips (eds), *Historical Atlas*, p.1.

⁴⁷ P. Worsley, ‘Relief and drainage: bedrock geology’, in Phillips and Phillips (eds), *Historical Atlas*, pp. 2–4.

⁴⁸ C. Slade, ‘The Staffordshire Domesday’, in L. Midgley (ed.), *VCH Staffordshire*, 4 (1958, London, reprint 1985), p. 21.

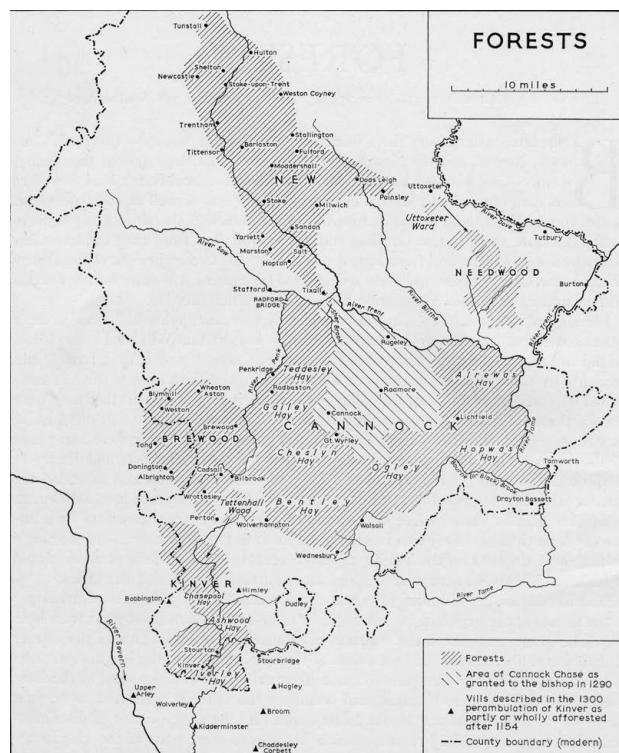


Figure 6. Extent of forests.⁴⁹

It has been said of the county at the time of the Domesday Survey that it was ‘primitive’, ‘backward and largely unsettled’.⁵⁰ That case may be somewhat overstated and comparisons across the region suggest that Staffordshire, whilst by no means rich, fits into a pattern similar to other midland counties such as Derbyshire, Shropshire, and Warwickshire. Despite this, ‘the low hidation of Staffordshire, the ancient heartland of Mercia, is an unexplained phenomenon’.⁵¹ Part of the explanation must lie in the troubled period of Viking incursions, the demise of Mercia, and post-Conquest turmoil:

Staffordshire was divided into five hundreds. Totmonslow and Offlow were named after tumuli, Cuttlestone from a standing stone, with Pirehill and Seisdon taking their names from small hills.⁵² The hundred was an important administrative unit, with meeting places, formed in the early middle ages, although there is some debate as to whether it was created after the formation of the shire or whether the shire was constructed around the hundreds.⁵³ There are also other meeting places in Pirehill (sitting on boundaries) such as *Witenaleage* ‘the clearing of the Witan’ mentioned in 975 at Madeley (S.801). Sitting on the county boundary of Shropshire and Cheshire, the location of *Witenaleage* may suggest that the county boundaries here respect earlier divisions in the area. The Iron Age hill fort at Berry Ring seems to have been

⁴⁹ M. Greenslade and A. Kettle, ‘A history of the forests in Staffordshire’, in M. Greenslade, (ed.), *VCH Staffordshire*, 2 (1967) pp. 335–358.

⁵⁰ Slade, ‘Staffordshire Domesday’, p. 1.

⁵¹ Gelling, *West Midlands*, p. 194.

⁵² Palliser, *Staffordshire Landscape*, p. 51.

⁵³ R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape: Beginnings and Ends* (Macclesfield, 2006), p. 74.



Figure 7. Pirehill hundred, showing major places mentioned in the text.

reused in the period when the hundredal boundary was formed, since both Pirehill and Cuttlestone Hundreds share access to it in a rather deliberate way, as can also be seen at Castle Ring where access is shared by Cuttlestone and Offlow Hundreds.⁵⁴ Hillforts were known to be used for a variety of purposes including the corralling of livestock, meeting places and places of refuge.⁵⁵ None of the Staffordshire hundreds have an important settlement or borough at their centre; indeed, only Seisdon occurs in the Domesday Survey as a settlement. Pirehill itself sits towards the south of the hundred named after it but on the edge of the major estates of Stafford (site of a royal *burh*), Eccleshall (an episcopal estate) and Stone (a probable early monastic site).

⁵⁴ This can be discerned from the pattern of the parish and hundredal boundaries.

⁵⁵ J. Baker and S. Brookes, *Beyond the Burgal Hidage: Anglo-Saxon Defence in the Viking Age* (Leiden, 2013), p.52.

In terms of approach this study has been influenced by Johnson's *Ideas of Landscape* which challenges what he terms the 'English Landscape Tradition' in a provocative work that confronts how such studies are approached methodologically and theoretically. He proposes that this tradition grew out of a romantic vision of landscape that can be traced through Hoskins (and the Leicester school) back to Wordsworth and the Romantic movement of the late 18th-century, and it has found it difficult to shake off this past. We are, he submits, successors to a *Romantic gaze*:

'Wordsworth tramped across fells, observed the landscape and just gathered it up into his heart and produced a poem... Hoskins tramped across Devon... gathered up his observations and wrote a historical narrative. Contemporary landscape archaeologists walk the fields, gather scatters of pottery, prepare hachured plans of earthworks, collate the sites and

monuments record, and then gather this material up and expect it to become an understanding of past processes'.⁵⁶

The difficulty for Johnson with this is the belief that often 'the past can be held to speak for itself, all we have to do is list or describe the remains of that past'.⁵⁷ The criticism levelled is one of localised interest, in solely using the tools to describe a local landscape without context or a broader analytical approach. In part the selection of a study area as narrow as the one chosen here must be open to the same criticism, it is localism writ small. The challenge is how does a study such as this avoid descent into particularism and un-reflected empiricism (to use Johnson's words) so commonly associated with local studies?⁵⁸ In addition, given that the shiring of the area is most likely to be a 10th-century occurrence, the wisdom in viewing the early medieval period through a 'county' lens may also be open to question. However, the purpose here is not to write a narrative history of a particular place, rather it is to develop a methodology for examining the available sources and to see what can be gleaned from a relatively silent part of the early medieval landscape. If the sources can be stretched and pulled to tell us something new, then it is hoped that the methodology could be used in other areas often left blank on the maps of those studying the period. This research concentrates on the hundred of Pirehill and the southern half of that hundred in particular. It seeks to find ideas and methods to address a Mercian, but more specifically a west Staffordshire, problem:

'The absence of a contemporary Mercian apologist and the patchy nature of such evidence as has survived the course of subsequent events, and the West Saxon ascendancy, have ensured that, until recently, scholars have tended to err on the side of caution, afraid of over-interpreting what does remain'.⁵⁹

In part the answer to the question why Pirehill? is that this 'backyard' has been carefully chosen. The selection of the research area has been quite deliberate, chosen because it *is* difficult, because it seems unfruitful and because it is always the blank space on the historian's map. Sargent, when working on the much wider area of the diocese of Lichfield, wrote that:

'There is a hole in the Kingdom of Mercia: the northwest midlands of England lies largely bereft of many of the comforts that textual and archaeological sources provide to the south and east'.⁶⁰

All too often the same areas get re-worked time and again, little new is added and our horizons are not expanded. This has resulted in areas such as Pirehill on the whole remaining outside current historical narratives:

'the sense of place ends at that point on the ground where the long story of the past is no longer known, where the land and the stories on the other side belong to someone else'.⁶¹

This volume proposes that such a state of affairs is both misleading and self-perpetuating. This volume is multi-disciplinary and, just as importantly, multi-focal, honing in on particular parishes, townships and specific sites. But at the same time it casts its eye more broadly into the wider hundred, county, region and beyond. Moreover, this research aims to stretch those few resources we have, to read against and across them to see how far they can go in informing us about the past. The early medieval period remains at best a difficult period to gain any certainty over, and Mercia itself is a problematic kingdom. This then is partly a study of the historic and partly of the 'prehistoric', and the paucity of evidence at the local level demands a variety of approaches. The aim here is to take one small part of this area, examine it in detail, a hyper-local study anchoring wider discussions about early medieval England.

At best the distant past drifts into our sight, slightly blurred and out of focus, like an indistinct object we squint at to make anything out. One could argue that trying to discern these forms requires a type of 'fuzzy logic'.⁶² This is not a challenge new to prehistorians or archaeological theorists, but it is a challenge for landscape historians to rise to.⁶³ Johnson is surely correct when he states that, for a landscape study, it is not enough to have 'a country man's eyes and a good pair of boots'.⁶⁴ Part historic, part prehistoric, this examination of early medieval Staffordshire is a place where the archaeologist, the historian, the linguist, the landscape historian, and the specialist in sculpture, pottery, poetry, metal working, place-names, and ecclesiastical history can all contribute. In this study will be found close textual analyses of written sources (*Vitae*, the Domesday Survey, charters, medieval deeds etc.), and detailed discussions of place-names, and moreover, wherever possible, the helping hand of archaeology has been sought. Above all though, this is an investigation of the landscape, for which numerous site visits and 'muddy boots' were essential to its conclusions. Understanding landscape must mean interpreting what we see now, but crucially also how it *was* seen and understood, to appreciate that it is a place where experiences, stories and identities are constantly being forged, re-examined and renegotiated.⁶⁵ We must

⁵⁶ K. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* (Iowa, 1993), p. 69.

⁶² An approach which has been developed over the last one hundred years or so in the field of mathematics and one that has become an established method for quantifying ideas. Often presented in complex mathematical theorems, fuzzy logic is used here as a simple illustrative tool rather than a developed theoretical approach. Fuzzy logic countenances the use of partial truths, it allows degrees of truth, but also vagueness and uncertainty to be permitted in a reckoning. L. Zadeh, 'Fuzzy probabilities', *Information Processing and Management*, 20(3) (1984), and F. Pelletier, Review of 'Metamathematics of fuzzy logics', *The Bulletin of Symbolic Logic*, 6(3) (2000), pp. 342-346.

⁶³ See Johnson, *Archaeological Theory* and Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*, p. 193.

⁶⁵ T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Abingdon 2000), and specifically T. Ingold, 'The temporality of landscape', *World Archaeology*, 25(2) (1993), pp. 152-174.

⁵⁶ M. Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape* (Oxford, 2007) p. 112.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*, p. 82.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*, p. 193.

⁵⁹ Brown and Farr, *Mercia*, p.1.

⁶⁰ Sargent, 'Lichfield', p. x.

not only people our landscapes but also understand the otherness of people in the past, the mnemonic qualities that landscape gives and is imbued with, in effect to understand the past in the past.⁶⁶ Not all the conclusions in this volume will remain unchallenged, as the evidence is deliberately stretched, but it is hoped that if grounded in good practice and solid data, we might be able to suggest that certain proposals may at least have been possible, and in some cases even probable. To achieve some sort of truth we have to find a way of reasoning with partial knowledge, otherwise the past remains mute by our inability to juggle possible outcomes and uncertainties and we will remain unable to understand how the people and landscape of places like Pirehill shaped each other in the early middle ages.

⁶⁶ See S. Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2013).