

Anglo-Saxon Barnstaple and Pilton:

New Perspectives on Old Settlements

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The Anglo-Saxon origins and evolution of Barnstaple and neighbouring Pilton, and the contribution of a possible ‘Pilton burh’ to their unique relationship, are re-examined here in an attempt to shed further light on Barnstaple’s identity as a settlement, regional Anglo-Saxon stronghold and putative site for the exercise of justice. Existing documentary and archaeological records and topographical evidence are re-evaluated using new data from local burial sites (including osteoarchaeology and radiocarbon dating), and an interpretative analysis of local and national place-name etymology.

INTRODUCTION

With the causeway linking Barnstaple and Pilton now a busy thoroughfare and the transition from one to the other apparently seamless, casual visitors to Pilton are often surprised by the distinctive appearance and character of what is now – and even in medieval times was by definition – a suburb of Barnstaple.¹

Much has been made of Barnstaple’s status as one of Devon’s four late Anglo-Saxon strongholds or ‘*burhs*’, the only one in the north of the county.² With considerable variation between *burhs*, a catch-all definition is challenging. For this study they are interpreted as enclosed and fortified, settled sites established by King Alfred and his son, Edward the Elder, to provide Wessex inhabitants with a network of regional strongholds no more than two days’ travel away in the event of attack by the Danes. In order to ascertain whether the significance of the landscape that was, or became, Barnstaple, really began with the glory days of its *burh*, however, a torch should at least be shone in the direction of the Dark Ages. This is not intended,

then, as an in-depth morphological study either of Pilton or of Barnstaple's *burh per se* (although these and their ritual and burial landscapes must form an element); it is an inter-disciplinary quest for the unique identity of Barnstaple itself, whenever that might have emerged, and its possible functions and relationship with Pilton.

The links between Barnstaple and discrete but juxtaposed Pilton have always been complex. During the Anglo-Norman period each settlement became home to a priory with just 600 m separating them; such proximity was highly unusual in contemporary Devon. A striking example of the settlements' dual aspect appears in the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century sale of five local grist mills: Port Mills, just outside the former North Gate of Barnstaple, were in 'Barnestapoll alias Barnestaple and Pilton or in any or either of them'. Intriguingly, the remaining three, at Bradiford in Pilton parish, were in 'Pilton and Barnestapoll alias Barnestaple or either or anie of them'.³ It is symptomatic that their interwoven nature still resonates now; on occasion, writers Robert Higham, Jeremy Haslam, Derek Gore and Nicholas Orme have all referred to Barnstaple/Pilton, or Barnstaple-Pilton (Haslam, 1984, p. 255; Orme, 1991, p. 64; Higham, 2008, pp. 174, 181-2; Orme, 2013, pp. 15, 17; Gore, 2016, p. 64). This unique topographical relationship is such that neither settlement should be considered in isolation, and since it is probably unrealistic to expect their histories and evolution to be any different, understanding their joint and particular topography is a key starting point.

TOPOGRAPHY

One of the most distinctive and defining features of Barnstaple and Pilton is their extensive, varied and shared 'waterscape' (Fig. 1). Barnstaple (SS 559 333) lies close to the lowest fordable position on the impressive Taw estuary approximately 13 km east of the Bristol Channel. There the settlement occupies a low gravel spur around 7 m OD, just south-east of where the Taw is joined by its tidal tributary, the Yeo.

Immediately north, old Pilton (SS 546 331) occupies the end of an ENE–WSW ridge at a modest 24 m OD, and from which a gentle hill rises north to a *c.*150 m peak at Roborough Fort (SS 569 353). Pilton is bounded on its south-eastern flank by the meanders of the Yeo, by a stream beyond the Bradiford Water to its west, with land gently

sloping south to the Yeo and the Taw. The Yeo physically divided Barnstaple from, and joined it to Pilton, contributing to the ‘so-near, so-far’ effect of two settlements otherwise almost intimately close.

The tributaries and creeks of the Taw formed marshes along the estuarine shores of Pilton and Barnstaple, and through the wide lowlands of the Yeo valley between them. High tides would once have encroached far further inland to the south-east, wrapping a sheet of water round the third side of Barnstaple. In 1630, Westcote painted this evocative image of the town, one probably not dissimilar to the landscape encountered by the Anglo-Saxons:

‘It is placed among hills standing in form of a semicircle, the river being ... the diameter; which, together with a river called the North-Yeo, at the two high springs by the swelling of the sea so overfloweth the fields that it seemeth a demi-island; but when the sea retires itself these rivers seem to creep between the shelves and sands, as hardly able to carry small vessels’ (Oliver and Jones, 1845, p. 295).



Figure 2. Benjamin Donn's Map of 1765 – Barnstaple as a River, Coastal and Overland Communication Hub ('Benjamin Donn's "Map of Devon", 1765'; facsimile edition by DCRS, n.s. 9, 1965, n.p., reproduced by kind permission of the Devon and Cornwall Record Society).

Apart from their important river and coastal access, Barnstaple and Pilton together formed the hub of an extensive overland communication network (Fig. 2). Pilton was placed to receive travellers north of the Taw, including from the significant old minster of Braunton due west, the extensive downlands north-west to north-east, the sweep of coast through Ilfracombe, Combe Martin and Lynton, and north-west Exmoor. Barnstaple gave access from Exmoor in the east, and anywhere south, including London.

The rivers and ubiquitous marshlands meant that Barnstaple and Pilton contended with almost identical environmental conditions. In order to benefit from round-the-compass overland access, however, each settlement needed the other. Both required bridges and causeways. Pilton Causeway (and two bridges) and Barnstaple's Long Bridge (and two causeways) were likely in service long before first documented (DHC, 96M/0/Box 83/8; NDRO, B1/0/2020 and Chanter and Wainwright, 1900, 1, p. 123).⁴

THE SETTLEMENTS WITHIN A WIDER LOCAL LANDSCAPE

Mid-Saxon royal government was implemented in part through periodic local assemblies, although evidence of any clearly planned administrative network is lacking. Rural assemblies could involve judicial functions as well as ordinary administration and taxation. In the tenth century, unsatisfactory efforts to implement royal governance at these assemblies, principally through royal and non-royal reeves and thegns, appears to have prompted a different approach (Molyneux, 2015, pp. 106–109; Lambert, 2017, pp. 133, 244–247). Beginning with Edward the Elder, this focused primarily on the *burhs* and trading places known as *ports*. Laws were promulgated, tying into these places a range of activities that included witnessing of moderately valuable transactions ('trade') and pursuit of criminal justice so that royal legislation could be implemented there in a closely controlled way. With so few *burhs* in existence, however, and scant evidence for significant populations at many before 950 at least (*e.g.*, Astill, 1991, pp. 103–109), the experiment may have failed for logistical reasons. Laws limiting trade to *burhs* had to be repealed and, for possibly related reasons, local assemblies underwent a process of reform through the creation of Hundreds.

Hundreds were smaller territorial divisions of the shire, and each Hundred also held a four-weekly popular assembly (Liebermann, 1903, I, pp. 192–193, *Hu. Inscr.* 1). These Hundred Courts were run by the people, for the people, and eventually delivered and enacted royal administration and justice. At Domesday, Barnstaple

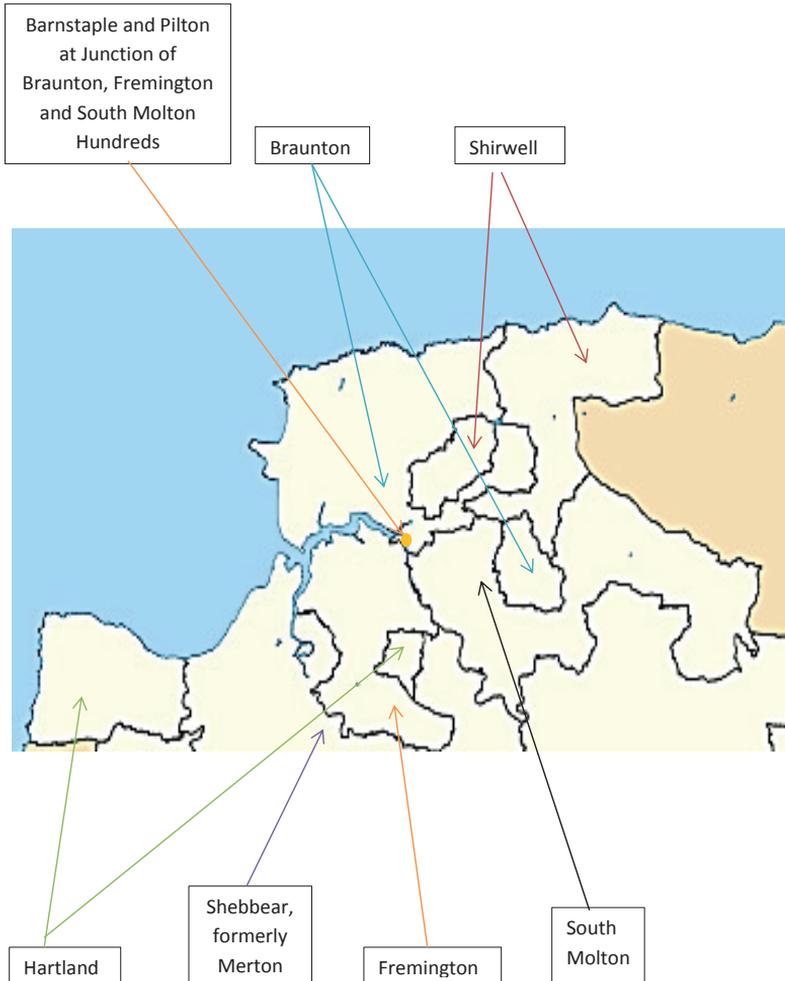


Figure 3. Hundreds of North-West Devon and the Taw Valley (Public Domain Image).

and Pilton fell just within the boundaries of Braunton Hundred, and bordered neighbouring Hundreds of Fremington and South Molton (Fig. 3).

The first royal mention of Hundreds comes from King Edmund (whilst at Colyton, *c.* 940–946), although this solitary reference suggests that they were not yet significant for implementing royal legislation (Liebermann, 1903, I, p. 190, III Em. 2; Molyneux, 2015, pp. 144–146). By later in Edgar’s reign, 962–963, however, Hundred assemblies had become a viable alternative to transactions witnessed in *burhs*, and it appears that the wider territorial reach and improved monitoring and regulation offered by the former encouraged royal efforts to standardise procedures there (Liebermann, 1903, I, pp. 210–13, IV Eg. 6,10; Molyneux, 2015, 152–154).

Since it is unlikely that Hundreds ‘created’ in the tenth century would be named after possible pagan deities as at Thurstable and Thurstable Hundreds (Essex and Kent, see below), at least some territories, assemblies and meeting sites from which Hundreds were derived may already have existed in some form. Early meeting-places were most often in accessible, rural landscapes with prominent topographical features (Brookes and Reynolds, 2011, pp. 86–88). Local variation notwithstanding, it was common nationally for Hundred name and assembly site to coincide. Neither was immutable, however (Anderson, 1934, 30.1, xxix–xxx). Most Devon Hundreds by Domesday focused on chief manors if not royal administrative centres, though a handful appear to have changed later, possibly restored to their older meeting-place names (*DB*, Pt 2, Appendix). Braunton was a royal estate when Barnstaple was a royal *burh* and Pilton was, apparently, neither (*idem*, Pt. 1, 1,1; 1,5; 3,25). In fact, Braunton and Shirwell Hundreds themselves show visible evidence of extensive land shuffling, if the latter was not created out of the former. Between 839 and 855, Braunton was also documented as a minster (Scott, 1981, pp. 112, 142, §53, §69; Carley and Townsend, 1985, pp. 40, 108, §16, §56-7; S 1695; *Monasticon*, i, p. 49, no. XCII). It would have controlled a large ‘mother parish’, sending out clerks to provide pastoral services in its outlying territory until the rise of local churches and crystallisation of proto-parishes brought about its decline.

EMERGENCE OF THE SETTLEMENTS

The earliest known place-name evidence for both settlements appears in the ‘Burghal Hidage’. Coined by Maitland, this name refers to a document listing a circuit of Wessex strongholds and the fiscal land areas (number of hides) allocated for their defence (Maitland 1897, pp. 187–188, 502).⁵ Seven later manuscript copies remain in two versions, A and B. A2, the only remaining exemplar of A, includes the *burhs* of Exeter, Lydford and Halwell, omits Barnstaple, and records the North Devon *burh* as ‘*pilletune*’ with a *p* (*wynn*) i.e. *willetune* (Rumble, 1996a, p. 26; Rumble, 1996b, pp. 38, 42; Rumble, 1996c, p. 124; Dodgson, 1996, p. 110). The OE *Willetune* means ‘settlement at the well or spring’ (OE *will* –*e*-fem. [‘well, spring’] plus *tūn* [‘farmstead, enclosure, estate’]). Pilton is – and likely always was – well-endowed with springs, and would justify *Pilletune*. Yet its position near the tidal Yeo qualifies equally for *Pilletune*, ‘settlement at the creek’, from the masculine OE *pill* or West Saxon *pyll*, *es*, ‘creek’ (*idem*, pp. 110–111). Since Wiltshire’s Wilton on the preceding folio occurs correctly as ‘*piltune*’ (Rumble, 1996b, p. 41), and that confusion over ‘P’ and ‘p’ (*wynn*) for Pilton also occurs between the Exchequer Domesday text and *Liber Exoniensis* (hereafter *Exon.*) (*DB*, Pt 1, 3,25 and Pt. 2, 3,25 notes), this Pilton variant is generally attributed to scribal error.

Date-wise, the consensus for the A version is around 914–919 or slightly later (Hill, 1996a, p. 11). On the basis of certain modifications and additions of formerly Mercian Warwick and Worcester, B is believed to post-date 919 (Hill, 1996b, pp. 93–94). With minor variations, every B version manuscript names the *burh* as ‘*piltone* *þ[æt] is*’ Barnstaple (Rumble, 1996a, pp. 27, 32; Rumble, 1996b, pp. 38, 48, 50, 52, 55). This is generally translated as ‘Wilton that is’ Barnstaple. Since there existed dozens of ways for scribes to correct mistakes, ‘*þ[æt] is*’ is unlikely to be an error. Unique in the Hidage, it seems to equate rather than sequence the settlements (Dodgson, 1996, p. 111; Dr Levi Roach, *pers. comm.*).⁶ It may be an attempt to locate a non-existent ‘Wilton’ here, given previous confusion over the Wiltshire Wilton nearby in the list; on the basis that both Devon *burhs* of Halwell and Lydford were correctly identified, it is unlikely that the addition stems from a lack of territorial knowledge *per se* of the far western extremities of Wessex. Yet it might still imply evolution of a ‘Pilton *burh*’. This is borne out by evidence of other

changes to the Devon defence network (see below). By the reign of Eadwig (955–9) Barnstaple certainly possessed a mint (Dolley, 1962, pp. 195–202; Stewart, 1988, p. 197), and by *c.* 1018 had a respected *burhwitan* or council (Napier and Stevenson, 1985, pp. 9, 76–77, 79). The *burh* does therefore end up at Barnstaple – if it was ever anywhere else – yet the A Version could still only ever have intended ‘Pilton’. If one is to understand more about the identity of Barnstaple, it therefore becomes necessary to ask, what *was* ‘Pilton’? Was it merely the condensed, geographically-limited settlement of current ‘old’ Pilton, with the inference that a possible *burh* there was later transferred to a site just downhill in Barnstaple? In which case, did any Anglo-Saxon presence in Pilton pre-date that in Barnstaple? Or could ‘Pilton’ have named a much wider territory so that a *burh* bearing its name could have been located anywhere within it? Since there are status implications for any settlement as a potential former *burh*, these possibilities deserve to be explored.

WAS PILTON EVER A BURH?

In the absence of clear defensive archaeology in Pilton, finding a *burh* is, as Trevor Miles suggests, next to impossible (Miles and Miles, 1975, p. 270). The lack of identifiable former defences or a mint predating Barnstaple’s proves nothing, however.⁷ Some major *burhs* with substantial hidages lacked mints under Edward or Æthelstan, and *vice versa*, so a defensive role may have been pre-eminent where trade was either non-existent or poorly developed (Blackburn, 1996, p. 165). That said, a range of potential, naturally defensive locations could have fulfilled the role in Pilton: steep, rounded Bull Hill on which the parish church stands at the head of Pilton Street, the hill once prominent and now obscured behind buildings; sloping Pilton Street, with or without Bull Hill, or the east-west spur at Bellaire (Fig. 4).

Roborough Castle (Burrige Camp), SS 569 351, an hillfort north-east of Pilton, has also been suggested as a recycled defensible alternative for “Pilton’s” *burh*. Unexcavated but presumed to date to the Iron Age, the similarity of its circuit to the length calculated from Pilton’s 360 hide allowance falls well short of unequivocal proof (see Note 5). Old forts, often in high, fairly remote places, were nonetheless convenient emergency refuges from occasional raiders. They could be refurbished quickly and formed part of a pre-existing



Figure 4. Different Impressions: at the head of Pilton Street, the attractive Feoffee Cottages (almshouses) are built against, and now mask Bull Hill, the knoll on which the parish church was built. The courtyard of the westernmost almshouse (out of view round left corner in Bull Hill) has a 6 m retaining wall where the hill was cut away to construct the property (author's image, 2019).

defensive network. At close to 150 m elevation, with 360° views that include the Taw estuary, the area likely played at least some part in local defences since the Anglo-Saxon place-name ‘Tutshill’ (OE *tōt*, ‘look-out’, *tōt-hyll*, ‘look-out hill’) persists less than 1 km west of the fort (Smith, 1956, XXVI, pp. 184–185). When the Danes began overwintering, however, and raiding segued to attempted invasion with land armies, cavalry plus a ‘navy’ capable of penetrating far inland by shallow waterways, requirements seem to have changed. The need for tactical protection of roads and, especially, river-crossing points that improved land access, may have dictated a transition to *burhs* of a different kind in more strategic, water-side locations. Certainly, King Edward the Elder appears to have had a co-ordinated defence system securing the North Devon and Somerset coastline before 914 (Swanton, 2000, *ASC*, A 918 [914]; D 915 [914]).

Even based solely on population studies mentioned above, the new generation *burhs* were very unlikely to have been rolled out as ‘new urban foundations’ (Haslam, 1984, p. 252). There is also

clear evidence, in Devon and elsewhere, that at least some Iron Age *burhs* in the Hidage were superseded: present in Versions A and B of the Hidage, Devon's Halwell was substituted before Domesday by Totnes with its crossing routes near the navigable Dart. Therefore, up to two of the four Devon *burhs* may have been replaced.

If Roborough/Burrige Camp had been "Pilton's" first *burh*, its relative distance from a communications hub and resulting lack of suitability for trade could explain the absence of an earlier mint and why a shift to Barnstaple might have been desirable long-term. In any event, at approaching 1.8 km inland from Pilton and about 800 m from the nearest river, how such a hillfort could have merited the toponym of 'settlement by the creek' is a mystery. The two current alternative site names of Roborough and Burrige, possibly Anglo-Saxon and both, whether by coincidence or otherwise, suggestive of *burhs*, could also reflect merely topographical references to hills.⁸

Even a *burh* at Pilton would have struggled with the intervening marshlands if the major Taw crossing-place had required full-time protection. Complicating matters further, Barnstaple itself and a number of other local settlements could have qualified toponymically as a 'Pill-tūn', 'pill' being a common south-western and Welsh descriptive for a tidal inlet or stream. Locally one finds Fremington Pill, SS 513 331; Pill estate, part of Bishop's Tawton parish, around SS 562 315, and Pill Farm, on the west bank of the Taw opposite the latter, SS 556 316. In fact, there *is* reason to consider whether 'Pilton' may have been a territorial zone, which, in its earlier days, may have included 'Barnstaple'.

PILTON – 'SOMETHING RATHER EARLIER ... WITH AN ECCLESIASTICAL FLAVOUR'?⁹

Parochial boundaries may show far more stability than originally thought and can preserve – sometimes quite accurately – land divisions extant in the eleventh century or even pre-Conquest (Probert 2002, pp. 24, 36, 60). Dated 1613, the earliest recorded parish bounds for Pilton are also preserved in the Pilton Parish map of 1845 and correspond to the three Domesday manors of Pilton, Pilland and Raleigh with their four Anglo-Saxon owners (*DB*, Pt 1, 3,24; 3,25; 3,28; 3,38).¹⁰

Originally smaller than Pilton's parish, Barnstaple's suggests that it – and maybe the tiny parish of Ashford – may once have formed



Figure 5. Historic Parishes of North-West Devon and the Taw Valley, illustrating the spatial relationships of Pilton, Barnstaple and Ashford (extract reproduced with permission from Kain, R.J.P. and Oliver, R.R., *Historic Parishes of England and Wales: an Electronic Map of Boundaries before 1850 with a Gazetteer and Metadata [computer file]*. Colchester, Essex: History Data Service, UK Data Archive [distributor], 17 May 2001. SN: 4348).

part of a larger territory of Pil-ton with its Pil-land (Fig. 5). What exactly this arrangement may have meant and how it may have related to surrounding territories and proto-parishes is uncertain, although several other incidences of the -ton/land combination occur in North Devon. One finds Dolton with Dowland; Merton and Merland [Peters Marland]; Harton and Hartland, and Barlington and *Beldrendiland [sic]*.¹¹ This reinforces the idea of an original Pil-ton territory.

The site of Pilton is probably not quite the ‘random pattern

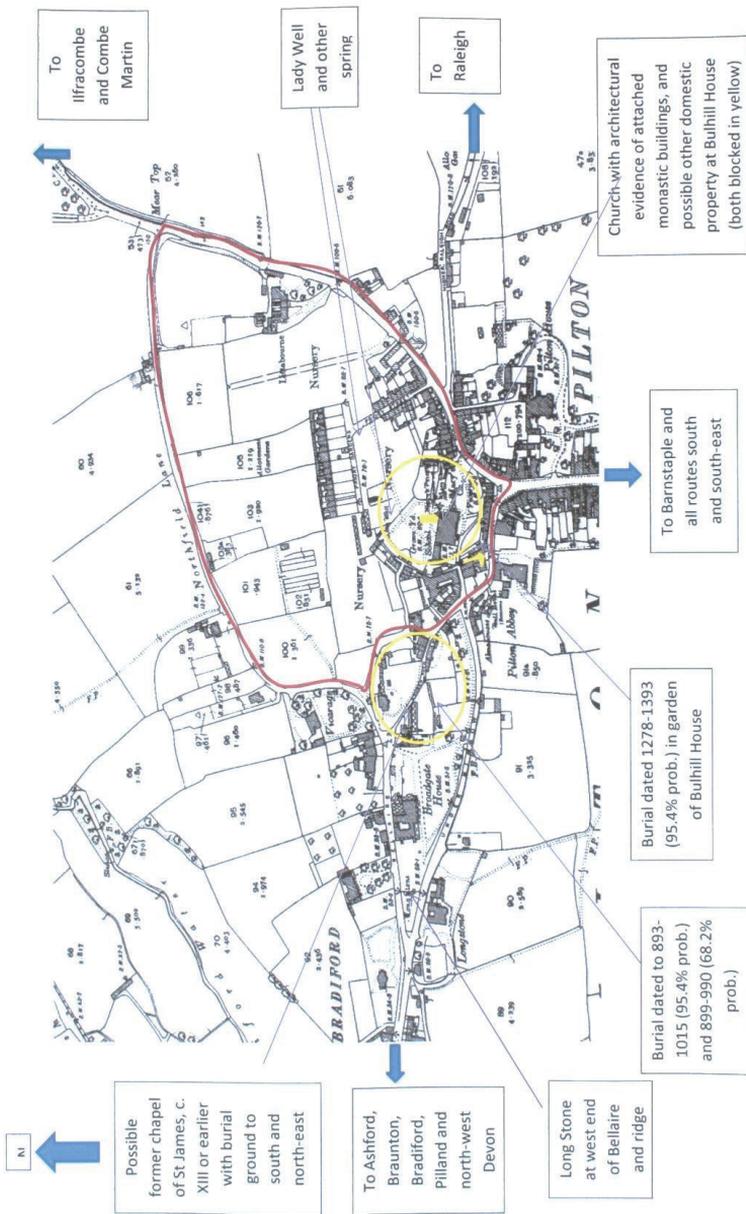


Figure 6. Settlement Formation at Pilton, Suggesting Two Burial Grounds and Ecclesiastical Sites (OS Map, Devonshire, Sheet XIII.2, surveyed 1885-86, revised 1932, 25" to the mile)

of paths and roads' that it might appear (Miles and Miles, 1975, p. 267). In fact, it possesses a very pronounced – and unusual – oval shape about 250 m x 450 m, with a suggested circular boundary or enclosure round the church (Fig. 6). In these it rather resembles Kingsteignton, near Newton Abbot, which was a former Hundred, royal estate, possible minster and possible early possession of the Anglo-Saxon diocese of Sherborne (Weddell, 1987, pp. 79, 81–83). Similarly, Lambourn, Berkshire, with its sub-oval layout, was a Hundred, royal manor and minster (Blair, 1988, pp. 48–50; Blair, 2005, pp. 301 and n. 47, 438, 448–449, 455). At Domesday, however, Pilton appears as a modest, middling settlement of no special merit (*DB*, Pt 1, 3,25).

One should not assume that existing roads fossilize ancient ways, yet the sweeping lane forming the north-eastern part of the oval is named 'Maertop' or 'Mear/Mare Top', (possibly *maer*, OE for 'boundary'), so the idea must at least be considered. Long-term occupation of much of the settlement core by a Victorian nursery casts doubt on the reliability of land layout; there are hints of amalgamated strip-fields. The 1972 excavations around 50 m north of the parish church also revealed signs of intensive and continuous settlement (Miles and Miles, 1975, pp. 272–294), although the lack of early stratified deposits and unforgiving shillet of the Upper Devonian Pilton Beds compromised firm dating before the eleventh century. Nevertheless, it appears to represent some form of nucleated settlement, possibly with its own infield or an open field.

In the report, little attention was drawn to the 2 m wide x 1 m deep curving boundary-type ditch discovered in Trenches I and III (Miles and Miles, 1975, pp. 273, 275, 284). This cut through the settlement platforms, and examination of old maps suggests that this ditch may represent part of an arc completing a circuit, over 50% of which is still fossilized in part of Bull Hill, the connecting courtyard of Bulhill House, Ladywell Lane and The Rock (Fig. 7). Malmesbury Abbey possessed an *ecclesiam Sanctæ Mariæ de Piltona* by 1151 (*Reg. Malm.* I, 1879, p. 349). This may or may not have been the priory at that time; either way, there may have been a clear, circular 'enclosure' of approximately 100 m diameter around a/the church at least. Interpreting the cut platforms is difficult: either earlier settlement extended over the whole of Bull Hill, or settlement was combined with an earlier, smaller church and/or ritual site.

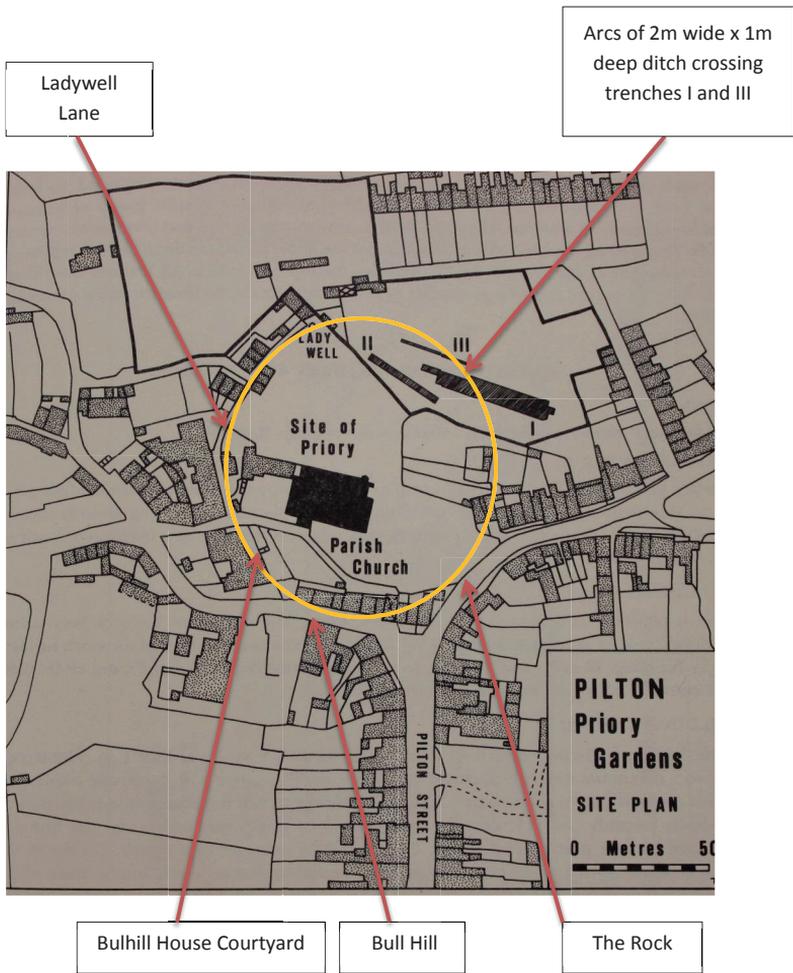


Figure 7. Possible Fossilized Circular Precinct Surrounding Church and Former Site of Pilton Priory (Aligned on Ladywell Lane, The Rock, Bull Hill, the Courtyard of Bulhill House and Excavated Ditches). Additions made to modified 25 inch OS map in H. and T. Miles, 'Pilton, North Devon: Excavation Within a Medieval Village', *PDAS*, 33, (1975), 267–295, p. 273 (reproduced with permission of the DAS).

The fact that Pilton drew a significant Anglo-Saxon abbey to found a daughter cell there with Barnstaple Priory already just 600 m away, *and* possessing land in Pilton and Pilland (*Monasticon*, v, p. 197) suggests that Pilton, poorer by far than Barnstaple by the Conquest, may have preserved status of a kind desirable to a religious house. This could have been a small sub-minster, or even, perhaps, an earlier monastery by then destroyed or otherwise defunct.

In 2013, radiocarbon dating of an adult male skull from the far south graveyard revealed the year of death between 1278–1393 A.D. (95.4% probability), 1278–1325 A.D. (47% chance) or 1347–1393 (48.4% chance).¹² Another, older cemetery exists at the east end of Bellaire, however, only about 200 m away. Sharply sweeping Dark Lane that ‘dents’ the south-west end of the roadway may represent a fossilized boundary for this, with Bellaire and various existing private paths possibly extending the circuit (see Fig. 6). The earliest documented reference to this cemetery is in 1545, when it was described as ‘*Seynt James Churchyd*’ in a post-Dissolution land sale.¹³ A petition for a chantry in the chapel of St James was made between 1208 and 1222, probably nearer 1222; thereafter it vanishes from the ecclesiastical record.¹⁴ Various documents including Victorian memoranda allow the site ownership to be traced from 1650, and located just south and east of the Bellaire-Church Lane junction. There, an orchard ‘now divided by the Church Path’ was the cemetery.¹⁵

Human bone discovered by chance in private land from the south-western cemetery area was dated in 2018 to 893–1015 A.D. (at 95.4% probability), and to 899–990 (at 68.2% probability). The skeleton was found approximately 25 m south of the house suggested to be on or near the former chapel. There the bones were recorded as ‘most perfect and most regularly deposited’. North-east of the path, they were ‘more decomposed’ (Reed, 1985, p. 63).¹⁶ The distance between the putative chapel and dated burial, and the fact that it lies in the apparently later burial zone anyway would suggest that burials on the north-eastern side (now Orchard House) may be substantially older. The north side of Barnstaple’s Castle Green cemetery (see below) is suggested on the basis of Miles’ calculations to extend slightly less than Pilton’s, even assuming that burials continue another 6 m within the Castle House’s wall (Miles, 1986,

pp. 66, 72). This earlier Pilton cemetery is, then, potentially very large, and begs many questions. Did it serve the community 200 m away on Bull Hill alone, or was this a polyfocal settlement? Did this cemetery include a religious building at the outset, or establish one afterwards? Unfortunately, whether Malmesbury Abbey acquired a church on Bull Hill and built St James' chapel later, or *vice versa*, is impossible to determine without material evidence.

The Bull Hill/ Bellaire site may have some potential as a complex sacred area. It runs east-west for about 400 m; any ecclesiastical buildings there would be in an elevated, visible, location overlooking the Yeo and the Taw, with the visual impact of ascending the slope from Barnstaple exaggerated by rounded Bull Hill at the top. Pilton could easily have represented the Townstal to Barnstaple's Dartmouth, the Torre to Barnstaple's Torquay.

At the far west end of the Bellaire spur stands a monolith, the Longstone (SS 553 342), now near the junction with Underminnow Road. Moved slightly by the Council and examined in 1967 (Arkle *et al.*, 1968, pp. 293, 295, 298–302), this appears genuine and the name is attested in 1693.¹⁷ Springs were often venerated, and at least one existed on Bull Hill in 1238 (Summerson, 1985, no. 317, p. 57). Combined with at least one relatively early graveyard and one or even two sacred buildings east-west aligned, this could well fit an Anglo-Saxon profile where ritual sites could be linked. John Blair's study at Bampton, Oxfordshire, reveals an excellent example of a complex and yet integrated ritual and sacred site spread over the unexpected distance of 1 km (Blair, 2013, pp. 197–207). It is therefore possible that Anglo-Saxons perceived the landscape in a wider and more integrated way than the modern historian had previously allowed for; specific sites, judicial, administrative or ritual *aspects* of these sites, or even entire settlements apparently separated in space may have formed part of a more unified landscape. This should at least be considered for Barnstaple and Pilton.

What is clear is that a relatively financially impoverished, small to medium settlement 150 km from Malmesbury had to be offering something more to the Abbey than the reflected glory of the royal *burh*. Of the seven Braunton Hundred sites remaining below their pre-Conquest value at Domesday, three were Pilton, part of Pilland, and Ashford, all 400–1200 m from navigable water.¹⁸ Whilst interpretation of value loss is not simple, on the basis that all three

were adjacent and vulnerable to attack, it is not beyond imagining that they could have suffered at the hands of the Danes or Irish.¹⁹

THE SETTLEMENT AND *BURH* OF BARNSTAPLE

In 2018 a preliminary radiocarbon dating from the Castle Green burial ground yielding date ranges of 722–892 A.D. (95.4% probability), and 775–870 A.D. (68.2% probability) suggests that this burial at least may have pre-dated any *burh* and that the settlement that was – or became – the *burh* of Barnstaple may not have been a ‘new urban foundation’ (1984 Haslam, pp. 252, 280 n. 4).²⁰ Based on this single radiocarbon dating, some of the cemetery’s inhabitants may have been contemporary with the British creators of the Guerngeni stone of West Down (Green and Padel, 2014, pp. 146–149).

The 1972–75 excavations west, south and north of the former Castle House all uncovered burials, totalling 105 (Miles, 1986, pp. 61–70) (Fig. 8). If the burial area extended as far in all directions as the northern dig indicates, and was used at a similar density, this cemetery could incorporate over 500 burials.

From the clearly-phased orientations and treatments of the inhumations, this was a site of long usage (*idem*, pp. 62, 66). The burial dated above is oriented east–west on the plan at G40 (*idem*, p. 65). Another phase aligns further north, close to the orientation of the former Castle House. Further north again, and clearly overlapping other burials, appears the latest phase. Dating G30, only 1 m from G40, to ascertain this period of use yielded ranges of 1023–1205 A.D. (95.4% probability) and 1050–1155 A.D. (68.2% probability). All these burials were subsequently sealed by the bailey rampart. This could have been constructed – with or without motte – fairly soon post-Conquest, in light of the Devon uprisings and Irish raids of 1068–1069 (see n.19). If, however, Johel of Totnes erected both, the latest dates are probably 1107–1111 (*Monasticon*, v, p. 197; Migne, 1853, clvi, col. 984).²¹ Either way, this site provides solid support for cases of exhumation previous to sealing, five of which are within 4 m of G40 (Miles, 1986, pp. 64–65, 68). It also suggests possible continuity of use of the graveyard up to, and maybe beyond the Conquest. This confirms findings elsewhere. Black Gate at Newcastle upon Tyne is a comparable site (Nolan *et al.*, 2010, pp. 157, 159, 193, 221; Craig-Atkins, 2017, p. 149). The minimum

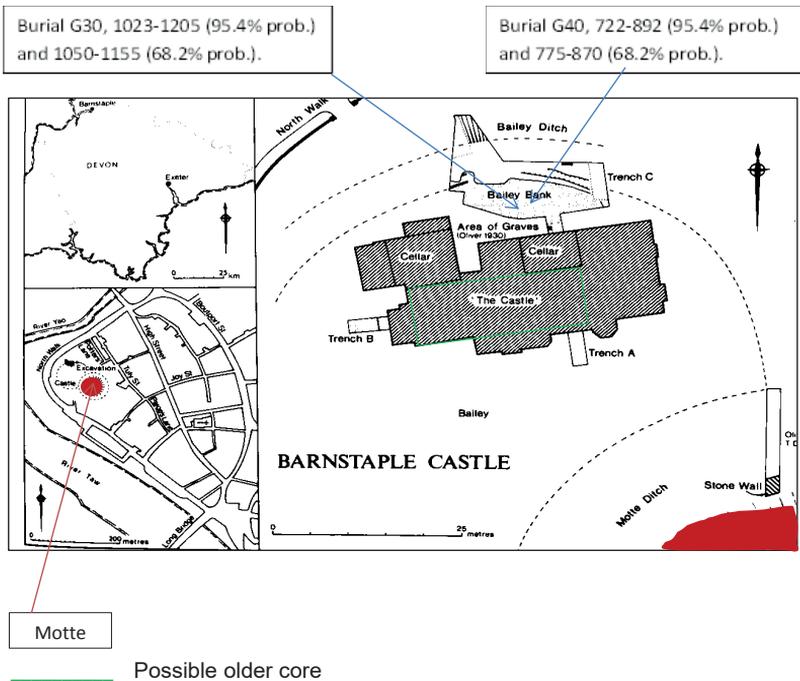


Figure 8. Site of Excavated Cemetery, Castle Green, Barnstaple. Proximity of Castle House core to graves, modified from Miles, T.J., *PDAS*, **44**, (1986), 59–84, p. 61 (reproduced with permission of the DAS).

period of use is, therefore, 131 years, and the maximum period, 389 years based on just two datings.

A preliminary osteoarchaeological analysis of 25 individuals suggests a mixed, domestic graveyard for an agricultural community showing no segregation by sex, disease, disability or age (infants excluded) (Chau, 2015, pp. 70–71; Miles, 1986, pp. 66, 68). Was this, then, an isolated burial ground, or was there a nearby church and/or settlement? Johel's charter reveals the Church of St Peter very well-established within the *burh* by 1107–1111 (n. 21; *Monasticon*, *op. cit.*, p. 197). This was a predecessor of the current parish church, likely tucked within the proposed intra-mural street of an earlier, smaller, defended site (Markuson, 1980, pp. 68, 71–72, 78). Given that the church has expanded over the centuries and thus lost some

of its original burial ground, this area may once have been somewhat larger, commensurate, perhaps, with a small, burghal minster. In consequence, it does not seem likely that the large burial ground at Castle Green was linked to this church, or that many early burials took place at the senior minster of Braunton.

Loss of 38 houses by Domesday suggests, but cannot be assumed to be due to, or exclusively due to, castle-building. Given the prolonged and extensive re-use of the Castle Green site and dearth of early documentation, only archaeological investigation could confirm or refute settlement near this cemetery where – ironically – the most undisturbed area for study is possibly under the motte itself. With the extent and long tradition of inhumations, it would not be unreasonable to find some sort of Anglo-Saxon religious structure(s) on or near the cemetery either, as at Black Gate above (Nolan *et al.*, 2010, pp. 157, 159, 187–193, 256–259). Whether an early small minster superseded by St Peter’s could be involved, or merely a timber or stone chapel built late over a long-standing cemetery, physical investigation is again the only sure way to analyse which phase(s) of burials (if any) respected any foundations. There is certainly enough circumstantial evidence to warrant further excavation. One shade plot of unprocessed resistance data from the geophysical survey carried out in 2017 hints at a possible below-ground structure of about 4 x 20 m on the site of Castle House, oriented almost due east-west.²² Bruce Oliver also postulated a former chapel of around 5.5 x 15.4 m free internal dimensions there (Oliver, 1928, p. 221). Taken with floor and roof plans of Castle House drawn up in 1927, it appears that this possessed one to two east-west core buildings, which had over time been encased by accretions on all sides (Fig. 9a, b).²³ Several mentions are made of the castle chapel, its chantry and maintenance in the fourteenth and even fifteenth centuries when the keep was very likely uninhabited.²⁴ This could all bear out Norman appropriation of some pre-existing church for its bailey chapel, with logistics necessitating loss of part of the old cemetery.

Either, then, this cemetery and possible church had a settlement some distance away (which seems unlikely given the long usage of, and evident attachment of the population to the cemetery), or the *burh* was never a new settlement at all. Instead it could have been an extension of a strategically-sited, pre-existing one in a manner that

Possible older core to former Castle House

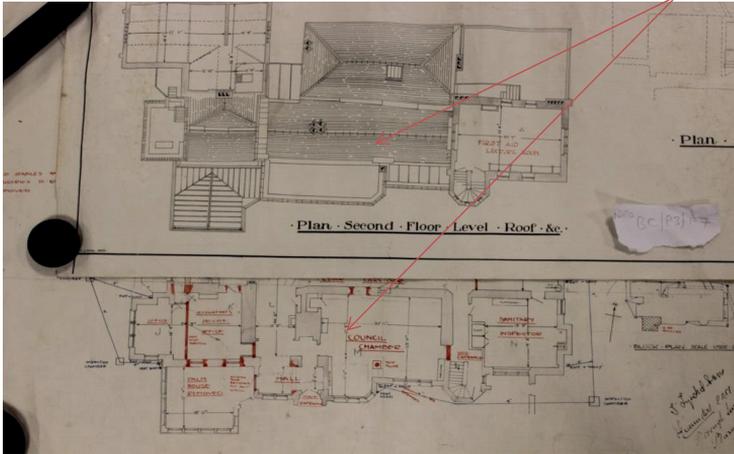


Figure 9a (above): 1927 Plans, Castle House, Barnstaple, roof and ground floor (from NDRO, BC/P3/1-7, reproduced with consent of North Devon Council).

Figure 9b (below): Foundations of the former Castle House, Castle Green, Barnstaple, in parched grass of August 2018. The suggested older central core of the building is visible, with a narrow, gallery-style extension and small, square room along its south-eastern side. The latter was removed before the drawing in Figure 8 was made, but is present in 9a above (author's image, taken from the motte and looking north-west across the former bailey and Anglo-Saxon cemetery).

defended it. This would have maximised its trading potential and ultimately – though maybe unintentionally – made it fit for purpose as the principal vector of royal administration and justice in North Devon.

Whether the above population pre-dated Anglo-Saxon settlement in Pilton cannot be ascertained from existing evidence. Had the sole, dated Pilton sample originated from the eastern side of St James' cemetery, where visual observations of bones examined in the early Victorian period indicated far more advanced bone degradation, the balance of probabilities might have been clearer. As matters stand, Pilton's settlement could still be at least as old as Barnstaple's; equally, the full extent and date-range of the Castle Green burials remain unknown. Yet the matter of Barnstaple's settlement and function is given an added dimension by a suspected third Anglo-Saxon cemetery around 150–350 m south of its final South Gate. This will be discussed below.

A PLACE-NAME IN CONTEXT – WHAT WAS 'BARNSTAPLE'?

Place-names are something of a 'stealth' resource: articulated and seen every day, the potential importance of these words for accessing the past, even the far distant past, has been much under-estimated.

'Barnstaple' is a challenging place-name to interpret. It is contended here that extending the study to national occurrences of this and related names or their elements may help illuminate something of Barnstaple's original significance, and also help to situate the settlement within its wider Anglo-Saxon landscape.

Firstly, it is important to identify as far as possible the original place-name from its evolved forms. The earliest material reference is the abbreviated mint signature of a 955-959 penny of Eadwig: BEĀRDĀ (Dolley, 1962, p. 197). From the Burghal Hidage, the three oldest copy manuscripts of the B version, yield *bearstaple* (B1/B5) and *berdesteaple* (B2) (Rumble, 1996b, pp. 48, 52, 55). The oldest, locally generated document is the c. 1018 episcopal endorsement to an earlier charter, which names *beardastapole* (Napier and Stevenson, 1895, p. 9). Other mint signatures offer BĀRD(Ā) under Æthelred II (978–1016), BERDE(ST) under Edward the Confessor (1042–1066), BĀRD under William I (1066–1087) and BERDES(T) Ā under Henry I (Glendining & Co., 1975, pp. 13–16 and plate

XIX). A voyage into Barnstaple's early medieval litigation in the Common Pleas 40 part-indexed on the Anglo-American Legal Tradition website yields literally several dozens of variants.²⁵ Within these there is periodic reversion to earlier forms and hence no consistent, chronological evolution of the word. From this veritable 'soup', Napier and Stevenson concluded the old form of the name to be OE *beardan-stapol* (Napier and Stevenson, 1895, p. 79). In 1980 Arngart suggested OE *bearde-stapol* (Arngart, 1980, p. 16).

To date, there is a select group of names elsewhere showing potential kinship with – or evolution from – the same etymological roots:

- 1) Barstable, an Essex Hundred, (with which Basildon needs to be considered), (Anderson, 1939, 37.1, pp. 50–51; Reaney, 1935, pp. 140–141)
- 2) *Berdestapel*, 1260, Bedfordshire (also *Berdeley*, 1313) (Mawer and Stenton 1926, p. 298); *upon Berdesstapel in Bedford* (Maxwell Lyte, 1890, vol. 1, p. 9)²⁶
- 3) In Anstey and Barkway, Hertfordshire: Bastow Hill (as *Berstalhell*, 1362, *Berstapelfeld*, *Barstalfeld*, 1479 [Gover *et al.*, 1938, p. 296])
- 4) *Berdestapelesholme*, Stanstead, thirteenth century, lost (*ibid.*)
- 5) *Bordastubble*, (HP 578033), a 3.8 m standing stone on Unst, Shetlands

How far these shed light on 'Barnstaple' will be explored after discussing the individual elements of the name.

STAPOL – FROM PILLAR TO POST

Despite difficulties interpreting the first element of this name, the second is generally accepted as *stapol* (OE post or pillar). The interpretation sometimes encountered as 'market' is not one considered by the linguists and may be a later derivation. This article is not an exhaustive study of the many *stapol* place-names, local or otherwise (although there is undoubtedly plenty of mileage in work with such a focus) but does review a selection that may have some bearing on the interpretation of 'Barnstaple'.

In simplex form, it is pertinent that *stapolas* existed as Hundreds, e.g., Staple, Wiltshire (Gover *et al.*, 1939, p. 34) and Staple, Sussex

(Anderson, 1939, 37.1, pp. 107, 187–188). Since Hundred names commonly coincided with their assembly site, a *stapol* could therefore also act as a focal marker for popular meeting places.

Stapol is more often encountered in combination with natural or man-made landscape features, e.g., Stapley, Stapledon, Stapleford, Staplegate, Staple Cross, Staplegrove, Staplebridge, Staploe (in Bedfordshire, formerly Cambridgeshire, another Hundred, from OE ‘*stapol-hōh*’, ‘post on a sharp spur of land’ [Reaney, 1943, p. 187]). *Stapolas* are abundant in Devon. In the Braunton tithe map, several plots preserve the name Staple Hill along the former course of the river Caen around 2 km inland from the Taw.²⁷ Within this form, the post may simply have marked boundaries or facilitated travellers’ passage through the landscape.

Beyond their role as landmarks or boundary features, it seems clear that *stapolas* could also serve a range of ritual, funerary and ceremonial functions. Aldhelm around the 680s describes as *ermula* certain ‘... pillars of the ... foul snake and the stag ... worshipped ...’ by the Anglo-Saxons (Lapidge and Herren 1979, pp. 160–161). In this guise, the *stapol* appears to provide a ritual or cult focus. At Yeavinger, Northumberland, a large part of the extensive royal ritual complex was oriented by pillars, and also included an apparently raked seating area (Building ‘E’) for an assembly to be addressed from a dedicated position or ceremonial chair set just in front of a post (Barnwell, 2005, pp. 181–182).

The Kent Hundred of Whitstable, the Essex half-Hundred of Thurstable, and lost Kent Hundred of Thurstable evince complex names where the *stapol* itself is described rather than set in a landscape. Whether or not the latter two represent OE *þunres-stapol*, ‘pillar of the god Þunor’ (Thunor) (Anderson, 1939, 37.1, pp. 47–48; Reaney, 1935, p. 302; Smith, 1956, XXVI, p. 146) or merely of the personal male name, ‘Thur’ (Bronnenkant, 1982–1983, pp. 14, 17) is not the issue here (although for two occurrences, both Hundred names, in two counties, a generic origin may appear more likely). The presence of possibly pre-Christian *stapolas* of Thurstable and Thurstable in the south-eastern counties where the Anglo-Saxons settled from the fifth century, plus the proximity of Barstable Hundred around only 15 km from Thurstable, suggests that all these were, on balance, more likely to be earlier and more or less contemporary creations.

John Blair attaches great significance to place-name clusters that unite the OE, non-living, man-made *stapol* with the sacred, living tree element *bēam*; one such zone exists in the Torridge valley only around 16 km from Barnstaple. Donn's eighteenth-century map preserves an apparently lost 'Beam' just below Jope's Bridge (SS 478 214) (Donn, 1765). Even now, one finds Beam House, Beam Wood, Furzebeam Hill, Locksbeam Farm and Staple Vale all within about 1500 m of each other (Blair, 2013, pp. 193–194). In 1835, a court meeting over common rights was held at Staple Vale (Alexander and Hooper, 1948, pp. 158). Despite this late occurrence, a possible link between a *stapol* and the law court is significant.

THE STAPOL – MORE THAN A POST?

Indications are that the multi-tasking *stapol* could also form a more complex structure. After the mutilation of Grendel by Bēowulf, King Hrōðgār '*tō healle gēong, stōd on stapole, geseah stēapne hrōf ... ond Grendles hond*' (Fulk *et al.*, 2008, lines 925b-27, pp. 33, 172–173), 'he [Hrōðgār] walked to the hall, stood on the steps, looked at the steep roof ... and Grendel's hand' (Fulk, 2010, p. 147). The exact form and position of the structure is debated, but that it is more than a post is generally accepted. More intriguing still is the amputation of the hand of fraudulent moneyers '*opa tha thingstapule*' ('on the court scaffold'). This is in the sixteenth of the Old Frisian Seventeen Statutes (Clayton, 2001, pp. 76, 79). Based on the facts that Frisia and Wessex showed close parallels in values placed on certain body parts in corporal punishment (Oliver, 2011, pp. 235, 237), and the presence of Frisians in King Alfred's court (Keynes and Lapidge, 1983, pp. 91, 258 n. 157), such structures may have been known and used before the creation of the *burhs*.

It has therefore been shown that a *stapol* could be a Hundred name, and, therefore, potentially mark a major regional assembly site where, from the later tenth century, royal power and jurisdiction operated through locally-organised administration and justice; that *stapolas* could consist of one or more pillar(s), possibly a structure or platform, and that by the later ninth century in England, if not before, the platform could be linked with corporal punishment at least.

BEARDE-STAPOL

Suggested meanings for the first element of this name have varied from a man's personal name, *Bearda*, to 'rim, edge', a ship's prow and a beard-like form of decoration. All have been minutely debated over time (Gover *et al.*, 1931, p. 25; Arngart, 1980, pp. 10–18; Parsons *et al.*, 1997, p. 65); the interpretation most commonly accepted at present is that of OE *bearde*, the long-handled battle-axe. The whole is therefore taken to mean 'axe-pillar or post'. An identical translation is proposed in Old Norse, *bǫrðu-stopull*, for the tall Unst standing stone, Bordastubble. (Coates, 2007, pp. 137–139) (Fig. 10b).

Personal names do occur in combination with *stapol*, often as boundary markers (e.g., *allan stapule*, S 577, in A.D. 958, and *Ælfheres stapole*, S 800, in A.D. 975).²⁸ This explanation is not accepted here on account of the relatively high number of occurrences of this form (Arngart, 1980, p. 10), amongst which is Barstable, a former small settlement, Hundred name and assembly site. The relative consistency of form also seems to suggest a more generic meaning of this rather singular, sinister word.

It is clear that one has in the previous examples several landscapes identified by their *bearde-stapol*: hill, fields and mound (holm). Barstable seems to have been subsumed into neighbouring *Beardestap(o)lesdūn*, also 'hill of the *bearde-stapol*', which may have contracted its own six-syllabled mouthful into the far easier, if unrecognisable, Basildon (Arngart, 1980, p. 15, n. 19). It is also curious that the property sold at Bedford was *upon Berdestapel*, again as though something in particular defined the site.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEARDESTAPOL FOR BARNSTAPLE

If Barstable, as *Beardestapol*, was a meeting-place with pagan contemporaries in the south-east, how and when did the name manifest so far away on the north coast of Devon? If it was not 'sailed round' before the Conversion (which is not impossible, but unlikely), then the 'axe-post' could well be an old term referring to an object which had preserved its function/meaning.

Since *Beardestapol* was to become a baptism for all time, it is worth attempting to discern any possible relationship between the



Figure 10a. Pilton's Longstone, now only approx. 2 m tall, stands near the junction of Bellaire and Underminnow Road (author's image, August 2019).



Figure 10b. Bordastubble (approx. 3.8 m tall), Unst, Shetland Islands (image from 2008 by Otter, licensed under Creative Commons, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>).

settlement and its *stapol*, any contemporary identity now lost, but meaningful to the Anglo-Saxons.

BEARDESTAPOL AS A POST – THE MONOLITH THEORY

On the basis that the *stapol* was a post or pillared structure, Richard Coates suggests that ‘Barnstaple’ may find its origins in a monolith, the name borrowed, as above, from Common Scandinavian (Coates, 2007, p. 137). A ‘Barnstaple Bordastubble’ cannot be discounted given three standing stones in Pilton parish alone. Apart from the Longstone (Fig. 10a), there is a second at Raleigh Lawn (SS 558 340, also displaced slightly by developers), and another formerly recorded in private grounds below Roborough Camp (Arkle *et al.*, 1968, pp. 303–304). The now submerged double stone row at Isley Marsh about 7 km west of Barnstaple adds to the precedents. The latter is unusual as a lowland presence but may just represent a case of differential preservation where other lowland monuments have ‘gone to feed the roads and gateways’ (Rogers, 1946, p. 124).

Based on Pilton’s survivals, one might have expected Barnstaple’s putative monolith to persist, particularly if it had named the settlement. In any case, a Common Scandinavian name would be unusual in England before 800 A. D., when contact with Vikings began to increase. With the settlement becoming a stronghold against them barely a century later, one wonders how firmly a late and foreign ‘baptism’ would have stuck. Genetic analysis of the Castle Green and/or Pilton remains would determine their ancestry and could certainly undermine a ‘Scandinavian theory’.

A standing stone may also have attracted a local name from the outset. Whether that sufficed to name the settlement is uncertain; in over three hundred years, Pilton’s Longstone named only itself, a tenement and a few fields.²⁹ If ‘Barnstaple’, as Pilton, was the Version A *burh*, it is doubtful – though not impossible – that it would have found a later emergent status and identity in a standing stone alone.

BEARDESTAPOL AS A STRUCTURE – THE JUDICIAL THEORY

Beardestapol could name places with status: meeting-places and Hundreds, and in this case it named a *burh*, a well-connected stronghold later to become an important point of royal administration

and justice with a *witan*, mint and probably its own minster. All told, ‘Barnstaple’ was anything but a name that emerged organically from the landscape; it was an ancient word, intimidating at a time that the area was threatened by the Danes; it was also a physical, imposing structure linked to corporal if not capital punishment.

Three of the four cited examples are in elevated, visible landscapes, namely an ‘*hell*’, ‘*holme*’ and a ‘*dūn*’. The existence of the Hundred of Gallow in Norfolk (OE *g(e)alga* or ON *galgi*, ‘gallows’, *haugr*, or OE *hōh*, ‘hill’, ‘Gallows Hill’ [Anderson, 1934, 30.1, 66–67]), suggests that historic meeting places could also be places of capital punishment named by the very structure of execution (though *c.f.* Wiltshire, Reynolds, 2009a, pp. 243–244). It must at least be considered whether Barnstaple and Barstable meant just that: ‘The Gallows’, ‘The Block’ or ‘Axe-Post’, a place of corporal punishment and, maybe, execution.

Speculative this might be, but circumstantial evidence does point this way. Radiocarbon dating suggests the emergence of execution cemeteries as early as the late seventh century, with most burials dating from the later eighth century (Reynolds, 2009a, Table 23, pp. 154–155). Whilst Castle Green cemetery may date from the same period it may therefore be significant that 150–350 m south of the *burh* there may have been another cemetery, the Anglo-Saxon name-form of which is still recognisable today in Litchdon Street. The earliest dated mention is a 1303 family name of ‘*de Lycheton*’ (Chanter, 1879, p. 204). ‘*Lands yn Lytcheton fylde*’ occur undated, possibly early fifteenth century, land and name as *Lidwichton* in 1329 (*idem*, p. 209), and land at *Lycyswycheton* in 1412.³⁰ The translation in OE is *līc-tūn*, a ‘corpse enclosure’, for multiple inhumations (Thompson, 2004, p. 106). This may be an abbreviation of *līc(es) wīc-tūn*. Paul Cavill feels that a building of some kind – probably not a church – could be involved here since OE *wīc-tūn* suggests an enclosure with a dwelling or specialised building (Smith, 1956, XXVI, pp 263–264).³¹ Curiously, the atria of Jewish sanctuaries have been translated in Old English poetry as *wictunas* (Kaiser, 1919, p. 40, no. 83); these can be passages or courtyards surrounded by porticos (Levine, 2000, pp. 330–332; Luca, 2015, p.163). Maybe a speculation too far, but the double stone row not far from the Taw at Isley Marsh does not sound dissimilar, and these were often associated with ‘inhabited’ funerary structures such as

cairns or barrows, e.g., Drizzlecombe on Dartmoor, (SX 592 670) (Spooner and Russell, 1967, pp. 209–212, 268).

If the local site simply marked an old British cemetery, why would the Anglo-Saxons have bothered perpetuating its memory? *Lictun* is mentioned by II Æthelstan (925–c. 935) in a law at Grately on sentencing for oath-breakers: they were not to lie within a *gehalgodum lictune*, a consecrated cemetery (Liebermann, 1903, I, p. 164, no. 26; Whitelock, 1979, p. 422, no. 26). Perhaps Barnstaple's *Lycheton* antedated local chapels and accommodated British and/or early Anglo-Saxons as a field cemetery. If later inhabitants had the opportunity of burial at a church 'Castle Green', the former site, consecrated neither actively nor by association, may have smacked of social exclusion of the kind suggested by the king. Alternatively, it may have been, or become, an execution cemetery.

Before the kings (re-)created local assemblies as Hundreds, and standardised and organised Hundred Courts, they had funnelled their authority through the royal *burhs*. Barnstaple would certainly have had its own tri-annual court, although variations make generalisation on the particular nature and extent of jurisdiction impossible (Tait, 1936, pp. 32–33, 54–55, 60; Hudson, 2012, p. 814, Whitelock, 1979, III Edgar, 5.1-2, p. 433). Most courts were multi-purpose then and not solely 'law-courts', but Barnstaple's early jurisdiction would certainly have included any offenders attracting a capital sentence (*idem*, p. 823; Lambert, 2017, p. 85). Since Barnstaple had the status to match Braunton's royal estate and minster, then, why should the former not have become the Hundred caput? Wherever the early meeting place(s) might have been, it has already been shown that Hundred territory was not inviolate, and that meetings places could be moved. 'Barnstaple' may already have had its scaffold and/or court when the Hundreds were designated, but Brannocmynster had emerged from its possibly British past to become an Anglo-Saxon minster and so may have outstripped Barnstaple in the prestige stakes during the pre-*burh* period.

The extent to which Barnstaple may have had to cede authority to the later Hundred Court is uncertain. Even if Braunton had enjoyed pre-Hundred status, Barnstaple may have continued as a specialised judicial assembly or place of execution for the locality or region. For Wiltshire, and within the confines of existing evidence, Andrew

Reynolds has shown an apparently quite consistent separation of Hundred meeting- and judicial execution sites, while minsters and royal estates tended to co-exist (Reynolds, 2009a, pp. 243–244). Barnstaple's importance and continued links with the Hundred of Braunton post-Conquest are demonstrated by the sheriff in 1344 holding in Barnstaple an annual 'tourn' of the Braunton Hundred (that would have included criminal proceedings), and the burgesses maintaining that they had always answered 'for the third part of the hundred of Braunton'.³²

Having ascertained that Barnstaple as a *burh* did have criminal jurisdiction before, and maybe still after the Hundreds were 'created', it is telling that there are possible indications of continued activity in post-Conquest executions here as well. Aside from two isolated plots, the Tithe Map shows a bloc of eight fields all called 'Forches' on a sweeping, south-facing hillside about 1200 m from the site of the Norman South Gate. (Fig. 11). Forches housing estate is now in the vicinity. The word probably derives from the French, *fourches patibulaires*, from Latin, *furcas*, and refers to the gibbet. Used for execution by hanging, the gibbet could be made of two, four or more large wooden or stone pillars with wooden cross pieces, and the corpses could also be left exposed as a deterrent. This execution structure certainly has some resonance with the concept of the *stapolas* as 'battle-axe pillars'.³³

Location-wise, Forches overlooks what would have been the main road into Barnstaple from the south: criminals hung or otherwise executed and exposed would have been very visible, a warning to opportunists and strangers and a promise to the community that the king's peace and power reigned at the *burh*. In or out of use, the great pillars of gallows would have impressed. Execution sites were also typically extra-mural, liminal, and near Hundred and, later, parish boundaries (Reynolds, 2009b, pp. 83, 86). The south margin of the Forches fields is the stream marking the parish boundary with Bishop's Tawton, the parish boundary for Landkey is about 700 m east, and both parish boundaries also form the Hundred boundary for South Molton. The Forches site therefore fits all these criteria. It also contributes further circumstantial evidence for the old name for Barnstaple, although whether – or how – Forches linked with the extra-mural, and now developed, Litchdon site can only be speculative in the absence of supporting data. Figure 12 shows

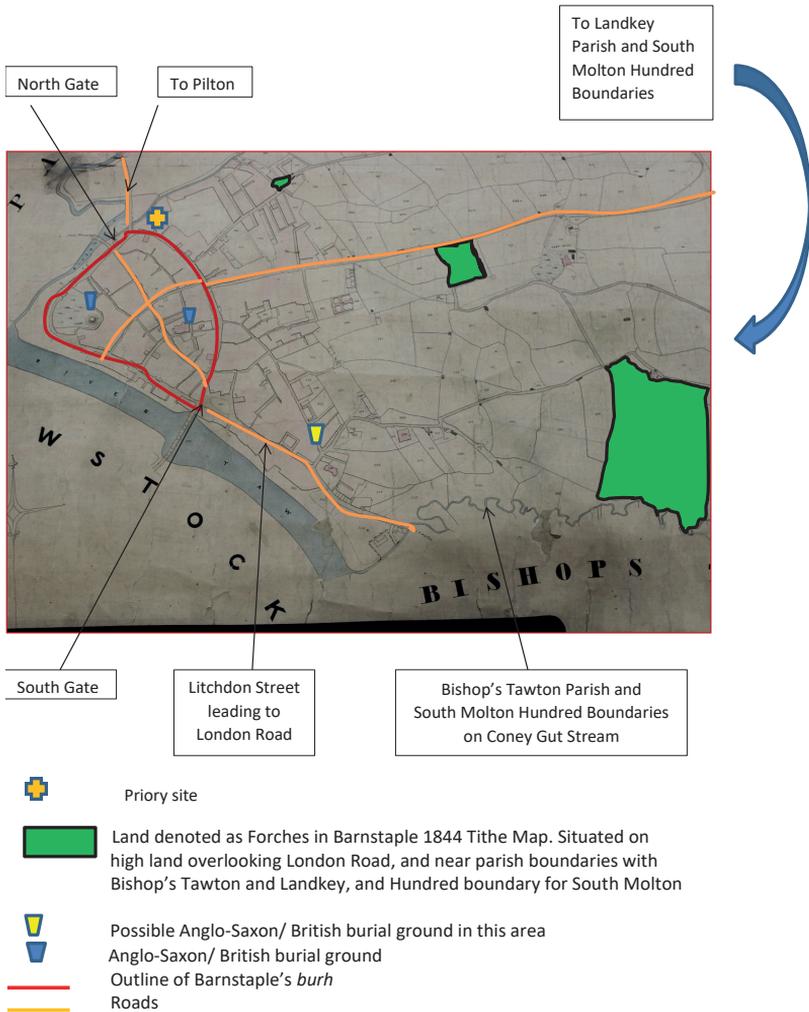


Figure II. Forches Field Plots and Putative Norman Continuation of Anglo-Saxon Executions at Barnstaple (modified tithe map, DHC, DEX/4/a/TM/Barnstaple 1,1844, reproduced with kind permission of Devon Archives and Local Studies Service).

the relationship of known and likely burial grounds of Pilton and Barnstaple.

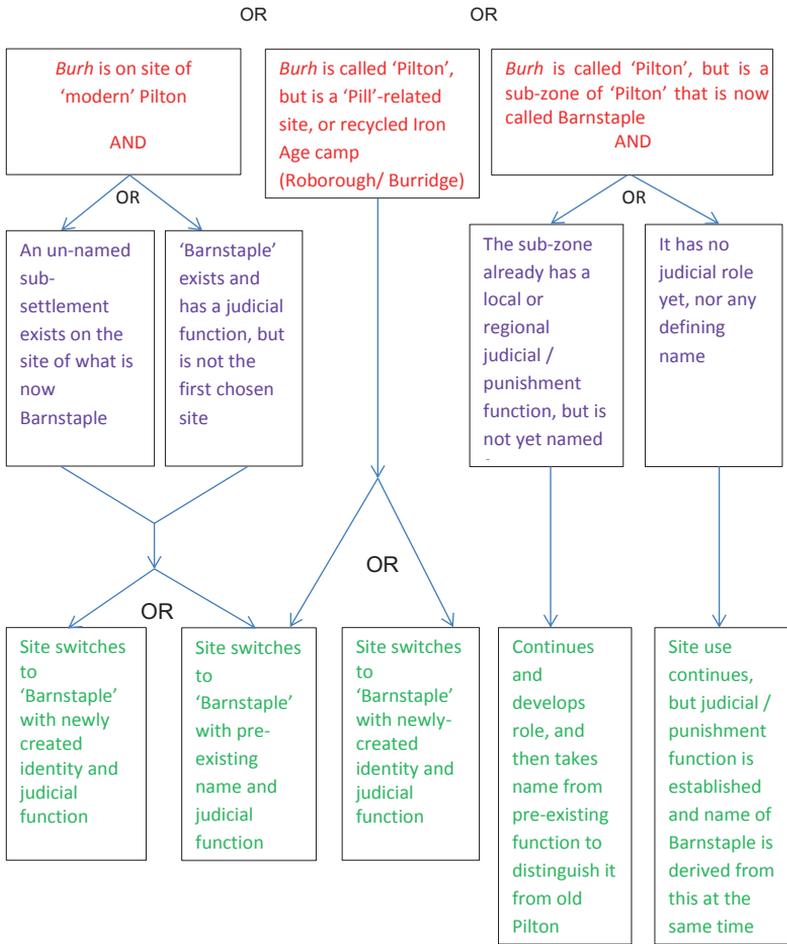
SEQUENCING *BURHS* IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HIDAGE

Having established various possible *raisons d'être* for *Beardestapol*, how and when might Barnstaple's settlement identity have emerged? How might it have related to the *burh*, and what might the place-name reveal about the local stronghold(s) and possible sequencing if there was ever more than one?

To recap, one possibility of the Burghal Hidage record is that the B Version captures the period of a definitive switch-over from a stronghold at Pilton to a successor at Barnstaple at a time when Barnstaple already had an independent identity. In this scenario, Barnstaple could only ever have been the later *burh* (Fig. 13). The other two possibilities articulate round the concept that the whole surrounding estate was called 'Pilton', whose core settlement had garnered status of a now ill-defined, but maybe ecclesiastical or ritual origin. At that stage, any other settlement or burghal site within it, whether at 'Roborough/Burridge', 'Barnstaple' or elsewhere, was undifferentiated and merely part of Pilton's polyfocal territory. In this case, Barnstaple (as 'Pilton') could have been either the *burh* for both Versions A and B, or it occurred for *B only* and was preceded by Pilton, 'Roborough' or elsewhere. In both the latter, Barnstaple's name and identity could have emerged only just prior to its time as the B Version *burh*.

In order to differentiate between the above, the first recourse is to one of the very few contemporary recordings of Danish activity around North Devon. By 914, King Edward had '*... arranged that there should be positions on the southern side of the Severn Mouth from Cornwall in the west, eastwards as far as Avonmouth, so that they [i.e., the Danes] dared seek land nowhere on that side*' (Swanton, 2000, ASC, A 918 [914]). On that basis, it would be reasonable for the head of the only major river estuary in the area to be included and defended at its banks. The first implication, then, is that the *burh* was always on the *site* of modern Barnstaple, yet in its earlier history was called after the senior settlement of Pilton and took the name of Barnstaple only in or after 919. The second is that 'Barnstaple' is unlikely to have been an early assembly site, which

Version 'A' burh.....pilletune



Version 'B' burh... 'piltone þæt is (that is) bearstaple/ berdestaple/ berdesteaple'

Figure 13. Speculative Evolution of the Burh(s) of 'Pilton' and 'Barnstaple'.

would have required a specific identity by which it would already have been known (if not 'Pilton').

How might 'Barnstaple' as a relatively undeveloped and undefined Version A *burh* (i.e., 'Pilton') have acquired its identity late, especially since *beardestapol* seems to be an ancient name? Whether consciously or unconsciously airbrushed out of the toponymic record for its unpleasant connotations, occurrences of the word by the fifteenth century mostly fade out. The vestiges, if not actually redundant sites, have evolved almost to the point of being unrecognisable. The first option is that un-named 'Barnstaple-as-Pilton' already possessed the gallows as a judicial court and/or execution site for the Braunton 'region', but took its unusual and archaic name of '*beardestapol*' from them *only around the time* of the B Version document. Choosing the apparently retrospective name of *Beardestapol* in the early tenth century could have been a deliberate policy precisely for its historical connotations and power to intimidate, in order to highlight ancient Saxon royal authority in the zone, or to generate historical fighting spirit in the wake of intensified North Devon coastal attacks.

For the second option, a possible A Version *burh* of un-named 'Barnstaple-as-Pilton' had no court and no gallows but acquired the latter and maybe the former around the time of the B Version's appearance and was named from them as above.

If Edward had not sited a *burh* specifically by the Taw before 914, i.e., the Pilton stronghold was at Pilton, 'Roborough/Burridge' or elsewhere, Barnstaple could have been either named at that time, or un-defined and acquired its name later as above. The existence of any early assembly, judicial court, and/or gallows could certainly have created Barnstaple's identity well before the A Version. The extensive Castle Green cemetery suggests a settlement of some size by then, however, so Barnstaple's profile might not represent a good fit for general popular assemblies, which tended to be neutral, rural locations. In any event, proving a putative burghal transition to Barnstaple – named or un-named – is impossible; even the known Halwell-Totnes switch is undocumented.

Andrew Reynolds suggests that judicial structures and execution sites may have been used by the Crown or its licensees to regulate society's behaviour quite early in the Anglo-Saxon period, as well as marking royal authority on the landscape (Reynolds, 2009a, p. 237).

If he is correct, the existence of Barnstaple – irrespective of when it took its name – may represent a developmental marker for Anglo-Saxon presence in North Devon. Whether there was any meaningful ecclesiastical – administrative/judicial rôle-splitting between later Anglo-Saxon Barnstaple and Pilton is hard to ascertain. What is curious is that with Barnstaple’s prime riverside location, good trading communications, and later burghal functions, it could legitimately have pulled rank and taken - or kept - the name of Pilton. For whatever reason, it did not. If it had ever held the appellation, it shed this and emerged with its own, distinctive identity; whatever Pilton was, with its own marked settlement and burial morphology and later attractiveness to a prestigious English religious house, ‘Barnstaple’ did not trespass upon it.

THE FUTURE

This reinterpretation has brought a little more definition to certain aspects of the hazy image of Anglo-Saxon Barnstaple and Pilton at the same time as generating further questions. There are several ways in which these could begin to be addressed. Excavation at Burridge Camp might determine any refurbishment or intensification of use at the periods under study, and possibly indicate whether the hillfort ever fulfilled any role as a *burh*, or even just an Anglo-Saxon emergency refuge. The Castle Green site also offers considerable scope for multi-disciplinary investigation of the motte and/or cemetery. A fuller study might reveal whether or not the burial ground was a ‘churched’ Anglo-Saxon site. It could clarify Barnstaple’s earlier settlement status and the occupation dates and genetic origins of its inhabitants, and maybe further refine Barnstaple’s relationship to Pilton.

It was unfortunate that insufficient funding and manpower were in place for the excavation at Pilton when so much land was accessible. Despite the inherent difficulties accompanying this now-developed area, Pilton would merit further study should appropriate sites allow. Whether its possible loss of status resulted from a particular cataclysmic crisis or gradual erosion in the face of Barnstaple’s success, the vestiges occupying its east-west spur all smack of a formerly more important, old settlement. Yet in the twelfth century, enough recent history and status remained to draw Malmesbury Abbey.

It is hoped – and expected – that the Pilton-Barnstaple case will evolve in the light of information to come.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AALT	Anglo-American Legal Tradition (accessed at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/ on 28/7/20)
ASC	<i>The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles</i> , ed. and trans. M. Swanton (Phoenix Press, London, 2000, revised edition)
CPR	Calendar of Patent Rolls, (London, 1891–1916)
DB	Thorn, C. and Thorn, F., eds, <i>Domesday Book</i> , IX: Devon, 2 parts (Phillimore & Co. Ltd, Chichester), 1985. Follows their chapter and entry notation.
DHC	Devon Heritage Centre, Exeter.
<i>Exon.</i>	<i>Liber Exoniensis</i> ('Exeter Domesday' plus related documents, Exeter, Cathedral Library, Dean and Chapter MS. 3500).
<i>Monasticon</i>	W. Dugdale, <i>Monasticon Anglicanum</i> , Caley, J., Ellis, H. and Bandinel, B., eds, 6 vols in 8 (J. Bohn, London, 1817–30, revised edition, reprinted 1846).
n.d.	not dated
n.p.	not paginated
n.s.	new series
NDA	North Devon Athenaeum, NDRO, Barnstaple.
NDRO	North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple.
OD	above Ordnance Datum.
OE	Old English
ON	Old Norse
<i>pers. comm.</i>	personal communication

- Reg. Malm.* *Registrum Malmesburiense*, eds J. S. Brewer and C. T. Martin, 2 vols (Rolls Series, 72, London, 1879-80)
- Rep. Trans. Devon. Assoc.* Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature & the Arts
- Advmt Sci.*
- S Sawyer, P. H. 1968. *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, (Royal Historical Society, London). Revised and online at: www.esawyer.org.uk ('Electronic Sawyer', Kelly, S. and Rushworth, R. *et al.*, eds)
- SUERC Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre.
- TNA The National Archives, Kew.

NOTES

- ¹ The medieval suburb could be a settlement supplementary to an original, enclosed, urban area, or a rural area (or small town) anywhere up to 8 km from a larger town (Keene, 1990, p. 98).
- ² The other three *burhs* in 1086 were Totnes, Exeter and Lydford.
- ³ DHC, 96M/0/Box83/52: Copy deed, William, Lord Howard of Effingham, sold property including five local grist mills to Sir Henry Rolle, n.d., late sixteenth century – 1615.
- ⁴ DHC, 96M/0/Box83/8: agreement following dispute between Malmesbury Abbey and Sir William de Raleigh, mentions Pilton's bridge, 1262; NDRO, B1/0/2020, 1772 copy of translation to English from a French inquisition, apparently ascertaining rights and customs due to the Lord and the burgesses. Mentions rent assigned to Barnstaple's bridge by Sir Henry II de Tracy, deceased 1274. Printed in Chanter and Wainwright, 1900, 1, p. 123. According to Chanter and Wainwright (I, p. 117) the document supposedly dates to *c.* 1281–91. It definitely pre-dates the death in 1308 of Sir Geffry de Campvill (*sic*), Lord of the Barony under Courtesy of England, since it mentions him holding a tenement in right of his wife. It could represent a local dispute, or a challenge to the lordship by the legal heir, Campvill's late wife's son by a previous marriage.
- ⁵ For information, Version A of the Hidage includes a calculation demonstrating that the number of fiscal hides listed for a given *burh* supplied the costs for establishing, maintaining and manning the appropriate length of perimeter wall. One hide provided for one man; four men notionally serviced one pole's length of wall (*i.e.*, 16.5 ft or 5 m).
- ⁶ Miles and Miles (1975, pp. 268–270) previously suggested 'opposite', 'accompanying' or 'with' Barnstaple (possibly based on Maitland, 1897, p. 503).

- ⁷ Of the Burghal Hidage settlements, a good number have no physical evidence of defences on the ground and, in some cases, excavation has also failed to locate them (e.g., in *The Defence of Wessex*: pp. 216–217 (Shaftesbury, Dorset); pp. 215–216 (Sashes, Berks.); pp. 200–201 (Eashing, Surrey); pp. 194–195 (Buckingham, Bucks.); pp. 189–190 (Axbridge, Somerset).
- ⁸ ‘*rūh*’ OE adjective, ‘rough’ (Smith, 1956, XXVI, p. 88); ‘*beorg*’, OE ‘hill, mound’ (Smith, 1956, XXV, p. 29); ‘*burg-h*’, OE ‘fortified place’ (*idem*, pp. 58–62). Roborough could therefore mean either an overgrown hill, or an old overgrown fortification. ‘*hrycg*’, OE ‘ridge, a long, narrow hill’ (*idem*, 267). Burridge might suggest ridge fort or hill ridge.
- ⁹ Barker, 1982, p. 106.
- ¹⁰ DHC, DEX/8/a/289, Pilton Glebe Terrier, 1613; Pilton Parish map, 1845, NDRO, NDA, B138/5
- ¹¹ *DB*, Pt 1, 16,44: Oveltone and 40,7: Dvveltone; 24,23 and 24,25, Dvvelande); (*idem*, 3,5, Mertone; 35,13, Mirland); (*idem*, 1,30 Hertitone, chief manor of the parish and Hundred of Hartland); (*idem*, 3,15: *Beldrendiland* [sic] probably OE *Beldredingland*, and 3,19, Baldrinton [probably Westbaldrinthon]).
- ¹² Now in the garden of Bulhill House. This and all subsequent radiocarbon dating carried out by SUERC.
- ¹³ Details accessed at AALT, CP40/1126, pt 2, f 2953: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/aalt1/H8/CP40no1126/cCP40no1126Pt2fronts/IMG_2953.htm and CP40/1126, pt 2, d3846: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/aalt1/H8/CP40no1126/dCP40no1126Pt2dorsers/IMG_3846.htm (George Rolle and Nicholas Adams, sale of property in Pilton to William Ward, merchant, 1/10/1545).
- ¹⁴ *Reg. Malm.*, II, pp. 34–35, no. CLXXVI, *De missa celebranda cotidie in capella beati Jacobi apud Piltone*; TNA, E164/24, Exchequer, Cartulary of Malmesbury Abbey, Wiltshire, 1201–1300, f. 190. Abbot ‘W’ could be William de Colerne (assent to elect, 1260 in *CPR*, 1258–66, p. 122), but is more likely to be Walter Loring, abbot-elect 1208–d. 1222. Firstly, the position in the cartulary suggests Walter; secondly, Henry II de Tracy had lost at least one son by 1260 and one might expect this to have been included in the prayer requests.
- ¹⁵ NDA, HRD-H116, Col. Harding MSS on deeds, leases, agreements and other historical documents belonging to the late Dr George Oliver; NDRO, 1239F/E22 – a Pilton Feoffee record of a Townshend Monkton Hall memorandum with notes about the chapel, probably c. 1850.
- ¹⁶ The Bellaire bone sample was dated with kind consent of the landowners. The Townshend Hall memorandum c. 1865 from the Pilton Parish Chest is now missing, but printed in *Pilton: Its Past and Its People* (Reed, 1985, p. 63).

- 17 DHC, 96M/0/84/13: Disposal by lease, Sir John Rolle to John Rogers, messuages, land etc. called Langstone Tenement in Manor of Pulcras, Pilton, 1693
- 18 Also Yard, 900 m from the north-west coast (*DB*, Pt 1, 16,83); Bradwell, 4 km from the north-west coast (*idem*, 31,2); Tattiscombe, 1.9 km from the north coast (*idem*, 15,56); Hagginton, 1.4 km from the north coast (*idem*, 3,27).
- 19 Swanton's *ASC. Viking attacks*: A, E, 833 [836], and 845 [848] (North Somerset); A, E, 878 (N. Devon and Somerset); A, 894 [893] (N. Devon); E, 910 (Severn); A, 918 [914], D, 915 [914] (N. Devon, Somerset, Cornwall); C, 981 (N. Devon and Cornwall); E, 987–988, C, 988 (N. Somerset and Devon); E, 997 (N. Devon, Cornwall, Somerset); *Earl Harold's attacks*: F, 1051; C, D, E, 1052; *Harold's sons' Irish attacks*: D, 1067 [1068], 1068 [1069]; also Houts, II, 1995, pp. 180–183 and 303–304; William I's attack on Exeter: *ASC. D*, 1067 [1068].
- 20 Datings instigated and funded by the author and carried out with kind cooperation of North Devon Council.
- 21 *Monasticon*: Carta 10 E.II per Inspex. (*Carta Joelis filii Aluredi*). Bishop Warelwast was not appointed till later 1107; in Migne's *Patrologia Latina, Hermanni Monachi, De Miraculis S. Mariae Laundunensis de Gestis Venerabilis Bartholomæi Episcopi et S. Norberti, Libri Tres*. The canons' visit to England is accepted for 1113, by which time Barnstaple's monastery was under construction at least, but the crippled Barnstaple monk had already been infirm for two years. On the basis that the mother house would not send over from France a monk too sick to help set up a monastery, it likely dates to, or before 1111.
- 22 *An Archaeological Geophysical Survey, Barnstaple Castle, Barnstaple, Devon, 25th July 2017*, p. 25, Fig. 13, Ross Dean, Substrata, (*pers. comm.*; also listed on the Devon Historic Environment Record). There was certainly a house on the site before 1684 (NDRO, 48/25/11/3, lease, Sir Arthur Chichester to Charles Standish), and the property was named Castle House by 1798 (NDRO, 48/25/11/22, lease, Sir John Chichester to Robert Newton Incedon).
- 23 NDRO, BC/P3/1-7, Barnstaple Castle Records, various survey plans of Castle House, 1927
- 24 NDRO, B1/0/2020 (see n. 4), pp. 1-4 refer to castle chapel/ chantry; B1/0/1137, undated copy inquisition of 1332 concerning 40 s rent charge of a bakehouse towards maintenance of chaplain to castle for Philip and Eleanor de Columbaris, also in *CPR*, 1330–1334, p. 396 and *TNA*, C143/219/13, Chancery: Inquisitions ad quod damnum, 1332–1333; *TNA*, C148/51, Chancery, Ancient Deeds: John Holonde, Earl of Huntingdon, ratification, gift of chapel of St Salvius within the castle, 1439–40.

- ²⁵ The Anglo-American Legal Tradition indexed CP40 records can be accessed at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/Indices/CP40Indices/CP40_Indices.html
- ²⁶ Exchequer: Ancient Deeds, Series A, A. 102, Release by Nicholas Pig, of Bedford, to Gregory de Sancto Albano, clerk, of a message and curtilage upon Berdesstapel in Bedford
- ²⁷ Map accessed October 2018 at: <https://new.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/tithe-map/braunton-1>, plots 1080–1083 and 1086.
- ²⁸ S 577, King Eadred to Wulfric, his faithful minister; grant of 10 hides at Boxford, Berks. in A. D. 958; S 800, King Edgar to Ælfweard, his minister, grant of 5 hides at Fyfield, Hants. in A. D. 975
- ²⁹ Pilton Tithe Map and Apportionment, nos 158, 165 and 86, respectively, Longstone Moor, Longstone Meadow, and Longstone Marsh. Map accessed October 2018 at: <https://new.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/tithe-map/pilton/> See also n. 17.
- ³⁰ Land name: NDRO, B1/0/837, Accounts of St Nicholas' guild, income from lands in Lychetonfylde. As Lidwicheton: NDRO, B1/0/399, Feoffment, place of land in, Coddedon to Skebir, 1329. As Lycswycheton: NDRO, B1/0/473, Rent charge of 6s 8d on lands and tenements in, Raschlegh to Boghe, 1412.
- ³¹ Dr Paul Cavill, University of Nottingham, *pers. comm.*
- ³² NDRO, B1/0/2024: Translation of copy of inquisition at 'Cheping Torington' re. supposed rights of town, 1344 (B1/0/2021 in Latin). Also Chanter and Wainwright, I, 1900, p. 148.
- ³³ NDRO, B1/0/2020. 'Furchies' formed part of the water boundaries of the settlement, p. 5; Chanter and Wainwright, 1900, I, p. 119. NDRO, B1/0/4142, Barnstaple Corporation Court Book, 1365–1406, p. 20: Pasture at La Forchis leased out by the mayor and commonality in 1374, but it is interesting that it was the borough that held the land; also Chanter and Wainwright, 1900, II, p. 49; NDRO, B1/0/833, Copy c. 1772 of three early fourteenth-century Barnstaple guild records, pp. 1, 6, 13. Four 'furchyngmen' were the first listed officers, maybe justices; also Chanter and Wainwright, 1900, II, pp. 17-19, 21. There is also a Forches Cross on the A382 c. 2 km north-west of Newton Abbot, SX 843 732, at the junction with Staplehill Road. Higher and Lower Forches Crosses exist c.1.5 km north of Lapford, SS 736 098, both at high points. Note also Hugo (1855, p. 50): Grant of 6 acres of Cleeve Abbey demesne at Nonemansylond next adjacent to Les forchis, to John and Lucy Bruer, 1367–1368.

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