

# Swinford: from Hwiccan borderland to English manor - Part I

by Dr Kevin James

The south-west corner of the Black Country, around Stourbridge and Kingswinford, has an interesting and complex history. Studying its pre-conquest origin is all the more challenging because of the scarcity of early documentary material relating to this locality. Of the surviving documents, one of the most fascinating is an Anglo-Saxon charter which details a mid-10th-century grant of royal land in an area “*to which the rustics according to their custom of name-giving and in sportive language have given the name of Swinford*”<sup>1</sup>.

This so-called *Swinford charter* was discussed in 1997 by Eric Richardson in volume 31 of this very publication<sup>2</sup>; and Eric’s article inspired me to look more closely into this engrossing subject. What I found was surprising and, as we shall see in Part II of this article, could fundamentally change our understanding of the origin of the region’s ancient parishes and manors.

Swinford is generally thought to have encompassed the areas we now know as Kingswinford, Wordsley, Brierley Hill, Amblecote, Wollaston, Stourbridge, and Lye. However, its exact limits are unclear and it might well have extended further east and south to include parts of Pedmore, Cradley and even Hagley.

The Swinford charter itself is a document issued ostensibly by Eadred, “*king of the English and governor and rector of the other nations dwelling within their ambit*”<sup>3</sup>. One of those ‘other nations’ was probably that of the Hwicce, which I’ll discuss in Part II of this article. There is a debate in academic circles over the true identity of the grantor, some researchers believing the charter to have been authorised by one of King Eadred’s successors, Eadwig or Edgar. The document itself is undated, but the grant is likely to have been enacted some time between AD 951 and 959.

The interesting part of the charter - at least from the local historians’ perspective - is that it includes a detailed and intriguing description of the charter estate’s boundary. This description (the so-called boundary clause) lists 28 waypoints sited around the estate’s perimeter. A few of the landmarks referenced (like Foxcote, the Stour, and the Roman road to Greensforge) are easily recognisable today, but many of the other waypoints are harder to decipher. The fact that we also have to translate the boundary clause from Old English (OE) only makes interpreting it more difficult. Nevertheless, despite a millennium of landscape changes, there is still evidence to be found in the pattern of local roads, watercourses and ancient field boundaries, as well as in the wealth of place names and field names recorded on old maps. All of these can help us to trace the outline of the charter estate.

Since the first translation of the Swinford charter, by CGO Bridgeman in 1916<sup>4</sup>, at least five other academics and local historians (including Eric Richardson in 1997) have published different interpretations and re-translations of the charter’s boundary clause<sup>5</sup>. Unfortunately, there has been great uncertainty over some parts of the boundary, and every worker has encountered significant difficulty in ‘joining all the dots’ along the southern edge of the charter estate.

With this in mind I set out to trace the estate’s boundary myself. Apart from my clipboard, camera and walking boots, my principal tools have been a selection of enclosure, tithe and Ordnance Survey (OS) maps dating from the 18th and 19th centuries<sup>6</sup> (a time before much of the ancient landscape had been swept away in the name of 20th century development). I think, however, that my most important tool has been a degree of objectivity: I have tried not to be swayed by the prejudices of some early researchers who presumed that the charter estate’s boundary would closely follow the known manor and parish bounds. (While many of the

Anglo-Saxon charter estates seem to correspond to their local manors and parishes, a significant number do not.<sup>7</sup>) I have instead relied only upon surviving landscape and place-name evidence to trace the charter's boundary perambulation on the ground.

There isn't space to provide a complete account of my survey here, but I will give a brief overview. Interested readers can find a full report (39 pages, 8 maps, 15 photographs) online at: [www.swinfordcharter.kjdocs.co.uk](http://www.swinfordcharter.kjdocs.co.uk).

I have illustrated what I believe to be the most likely course of the charter estate's boundary in figure 1, which shows the boundary waypoints that I have been able to identify together with the likely location of Anglo-Saxon settlements, roads and watercourses. The pattern of later medieval manors and parishes is superimposed. Pedmore manor is in the south; Pedmore parish shares the same outline. Oldswinford manor lies between Pedmore and the River Stour, whereas Oldswinford parish encompasses two separate manors: Oldswinford itself and Amblecote north of the Stour. It is interesting to note that, until the boundary changes of 1974, Amblecote lay in Staffordshire while the rest of Oldswinford parish lay in Worcestershire, despite both being part of the Worcester diocese.

In the following discussion, I'll list the boundary waypoints in terms of their most likely modern English translations or, if the translation is in doubt, in their original OE form (shown in italic type). It will all probably make more sense if you have a suitable map to refer to. A modern OS Explorer map is useful, but if you want to follow the boundary on older maps which often show landscape features that have since been obliterated, you can download a variety of 18th, 19th and 20th-century maps from my web site:

[www.oldstourbridgemaps.kjdocs.co.uk](http://www.oldstourbridgemaps.kjdocs.co.uk).

The charter's boundary clause begins at **Swine Ford** which probably represents the point at which the ancient Droitwich-Stafford road forded the Stour. The next three waypoints are also fords - **Pecg's ford**, **robbers' (or deep) ford** and *deonflincford* - which were most likely located on the Stour near to the present-day Stepping Stones, Bagley Street and Dudley Road at Lye. Whilst there is some uncertainty about the detail of this attribution, there is little doubt that the charter's boundary followed the Stour eastwards until it reached the waypoint referred to in the charter as the **hollow batch**. This almost certainly represents the confluence of the Stour and the Salt Brook, near the present-day Saltbrook Road.

Here the boundary turned south to follow the brook, passing two more of the charter's waypoints: the **earth bridge** (which probably lay on the forerunner of the Lye-to-Halesowen road) and the *tigwellan* (probably meaning tile, or potsherd, spring). The Salt Brook actually has two arms and the charter's boundary might have followed either of them<sup>8</sup>. The landscape evidence is by no means conclusive though, so figure 1 illustrates both possibilities. Regrettably, we are not helped by the next waypoint, Ymma's holly, as no evidence of this tree remains today. But whichever route is followed we eventually arrive at the valley of Lutley Gutter, which is in all probability the waypoint named **Cuda's valley** in the charter.

So far the route has been fairly straightforward, but from this point onwards we embark upon the charter estate's southern boundary, the section that has engendered the most controversy (and difficulty) in previous studies. GB Grundy (1928), RL Chambers (1978) and D Hooke (1990) attempted to follow the Oldswinford parish boundary at first, but they each discovered that the charter bounds appeared to swing northwards dividing Oldswinford village from its agricultural land, which doesn't seem very likely. Dr Hooke also suggested an alternative route south towards Wychbury Hill, but was unable to identify candidates for all of the subsequent waypoints. Eric Richardson discussed this route in his 1997 article. In the same

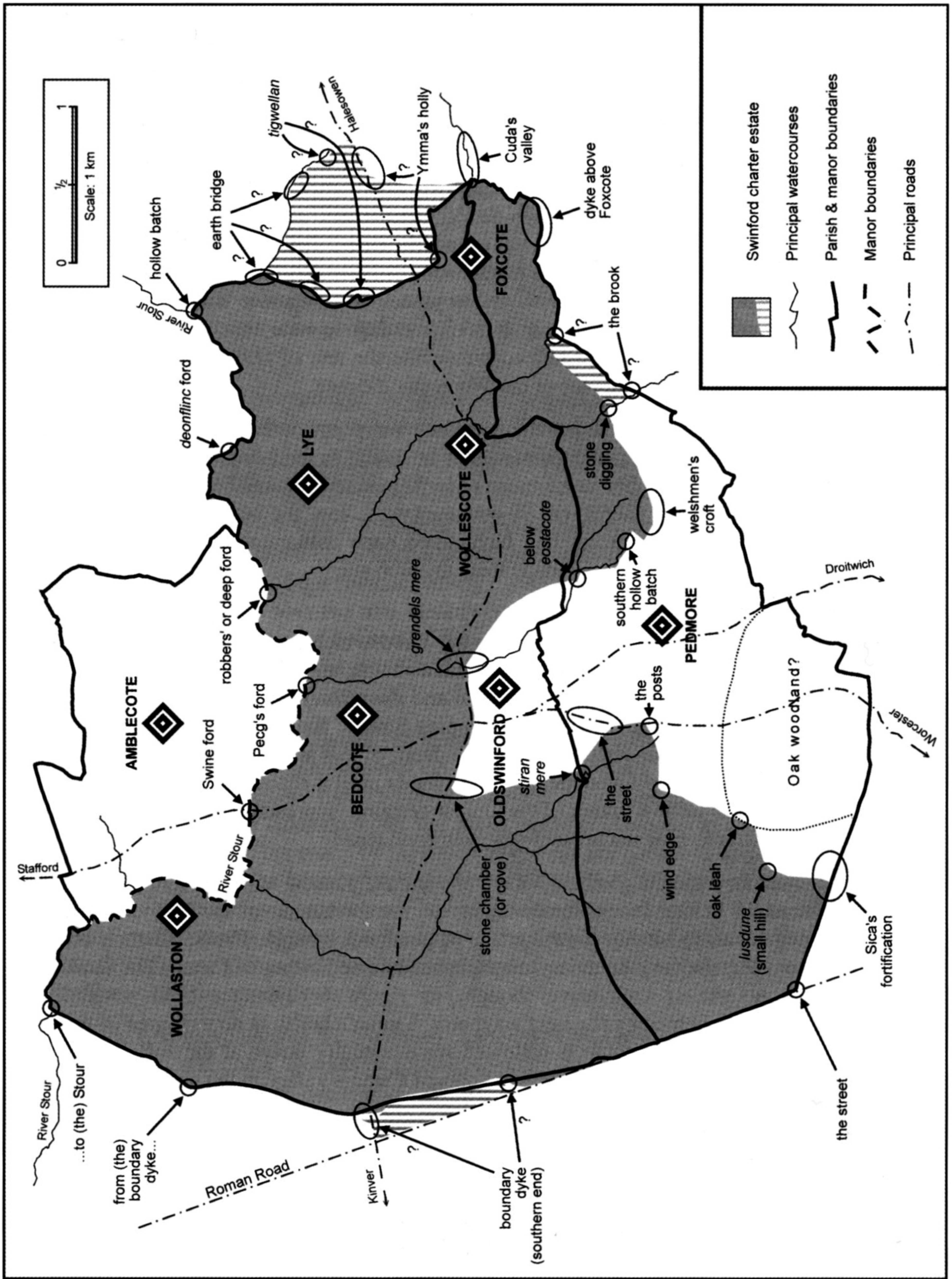


Figure 1: The Swinford charter estate (shaded) and boundary waypoints compared with the later manor and parish outlines. (Image courtesy of the author)

year Jean Pritchard and the Hagley Historical & Field Society, who had attempted to follow the Pedmore-Hagley parish boundary instead, also found that many waypoints in the central section did not readily fit the landscape or place-name evidence<sup>9</sup>.

The solution presented here and online<sup>10</sup> combines elements of these previous studies with observations from new map and field work. The location of each waypoint on the southern boundary is described individually below:

#### **from Cuda's valley to the dyke above Foxcote**

Four of the five previous researchers have turned west here to follow the Oldswinford parish boundary. This seems puzzling because the land does not rise appreciably in that direction and is unlikely to have been described as 'above Foxcote'. A more obvious landmark is the bank and ditch lying upon the high ground south of Foxcote which, for several hundred metres, coincides with the Pedmore-Hagley parish boundary. So there we will go, and proceed to follow the dyke westwards.

#### **along (the) dyke to the brook**

The brook in question might have been the one running through Hodge Hole Dingle or perhaps a more minor watercourse to its east. I suspect the former brook is the one referred to in the charter, but whichever we choose, it makes only a small difference to the boundary route.

#### **to the stone-digging**

This is probably the ancient quarry in Hodge Hole Dingle that is marked on the 1888 6-inch OS map or a similar quarry close by.

#### **from the stone-digging by the eaves (of a wood), or by the hill-foot, to Welshmen's croft**

Here **Welshmen's croft** is translated from the Old English *walacrofte*; and this term probably survived into at least the 19th century as the field name Wall Croft which was recorded on the 1846 tithe map of Pedmore. This should not be confused with Wallcroft field recorded on Josiah Bach's 1699 plan of Oldswinford.

#### **from Welshmen's croft to the southern hollow batch**

As we have already seen, the term **hollow batch** refers to a stream valley, and in this case it is likely to have meant the southern - or more accurately, the south-western - arm of the Clatterbatch (brook) running through Ham Dingle. This brook started at a spring on the northern edge of (the now built upon) Wall Croft field and, as shown in figure 1, drains through a small, but steep sided, valley towards Oldswinford.

#### **along the batch to below *eostacote***

Clearly we must travel some distance north-west along the brook, but to where? The term *eostacote* has no obvious meaning and may be a misspelling. Some researchers have assumed it should have been written *Preosta Cote*, priest's cottage<sup>11</sup>, representing a site near that occupied by the much later Prescott House at the top of Chawn Hill. Yet it seems unlikely that a scribe would accidentally omit the initial consonants of a word. Other possibilities include East Cottage or perhaps an allusion to *Eostre*, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, or to *Eota*, a person of Jutish descent. I think East Cottage is the most plausible meaning and that this building was probably located near to the site of the later Ham Farm (i.e. in the vicinity of Old Ham Lane)<sup>12</sup>.

#### **along the dyke to *grendels mere* (possibly the pond of the gravelly stream, Green Lea Pond, or a reference to the mythical character Grendel from Beowulf)**

Josiah Bach's 1699 plan of the parish of Oldswinford depicts a long sweeping field boundary running from the area of Ham Farm towards the western end of Chawn Hill. This

feature terminates the adjoining field boundaries and is somewhat longer and more continuous than the latter. These characteristics are all sometimes indicative of greater age; and it is, conceivable that this 650m long feature represents the dyke referred to in the charter (or at least some artefact of it). In 1699 the feature's northern end veered towards the Clatterbatch (brook) where the valley widens in the vicinity of the present-day Church Road, Castle Grove and Stourbridge Junction railway station. The topography of the land here would have made it ideal for damming the brook to form large fish ponds; and indeed, one or more fish ponds existed in the area until at least the 1950s. This location (or perhaps a little further downstream, north of Brook Road) would undoubtedly be a good candidate for *grendels mere*.

#### **from *grendels mere* to (the) stone chamber (or coves), and from (the) stone chamber (or coves) along (the) hill to *stiran mere***

It is useful to consider these two waypoints together. The second one implies a route along a roughly linear hill towards a pond used for fresh-water sturgeon. The hill in question is probably the 20m high Triassic sandstone escarpment that runs south from Hanbury Hill, across Heath Lane and then along the line of Love Lane. Its southern end (near the present-day Peartree Drive) lay on the edge of a notoriously watery site known as The Moor in 1733<sup>13</sup>. A large fish pond is located there today, on the line of a now culverted stream. It is also shown on 18th and 19th century maps; and if this pool does not itself represent *stiran mere*, it seems probable, because of the watery nature of the surrounding area, that *stiran mere* was located very close by.

If this attribution is correct, it is likely that the **stone chamber (or coves)** also lay somewhere back along the line of the sandstone escarpment. The boundary clause does not specify a route to the **stone chamber** so we can assume that it was obvious at the time, perhaps following an established road or track such as the ancient Halesowen-Kinver road (i.e. Glasshouse Hill and Heath Lane). In this case, the **stone chamber** may have been situated near the junction of Heath Lane and Love Lane. Alternatively it could have been located a little further north nearer Hanbury Hill where there is evidence of ancient quarrying and the possibility of a prehistoric, perhaps stone-lined, barrow<sup>14</sup>.

This interpretation of the boundary clause would probably be consistent with the charter estate excluding the entire settlement of Oldswinford and its cultivated lands.

#### **from *stiran mere* to the street**

Although the word 'street' in the charters often refers to a Roman road, it was frequently used in the late Anglo-Saxon period to describe any paved or urban road. It seems most likely that the street in question was the forerunner of the B4187 (formerly A450) Worcester Lane; and it is quite possible that Worcester Lane - the main route from Oldswinford to Worcester, the diocesan and regional centre - was of sufficient importance to have been surfaced in some way at the time of the charter.

#### **along (the) street to the posts**

There is no evidence of **the posts** today. They might have been marker or direction posts located at a feature such as a road junction or ford<sup>15</sup>; and if my interpretation of the next waypoint is correct, **the posts** would probably have been sited near the junction of Worcester Lane and what is today Racecourse Lane and Redlake Road or perhaps a few tens of metres further south where Worcester Lane would have forded a small stream that drained into the supposed *stiran mere*.

#### **from the post to Wind Edge**

In this context, **Edge** probably means a flat-topped ridge or the tip of a promontory<sup>16</sup>, and there is indeed a location nearby that fits that description well. A north-facing, flat-topped

promontory, now known as Rock Mount, protrudes from the side of a 20m high escarpment near the junction of the present-day Ounty John Lane and Racecourse Lane. The promontory seems deserving of the name **Wind Edge** as it occupies a very exposed position: westerly winds blow almost unimpeded across the low-lying former heath- and moor-land to the west, and are then funnelled and intensified by the escarpment.

#### **from Wind Edge to oak lēah**

This waypoint refers to an area of oak woodland, probably being a managed wood or wooded pasture at the time of the charter. These were important resources and were often enclosed by hedges or fences in the Anglo-Saxon period. The 1846 tithe map of Pedmore shows fields named Oak Leasow and Barkers Oak within a region delineated by long curved field boundaries, and I believe that these features might be the last surviving fingerprint of the 10th-century **oak lēah**. The putative woodland's northern boundary is intersected by Worcester Lane at a point exactly one mile by road from St Mary's church at Oldswinford; and an adjacent field, named Mile Oak, possibly indicates that at least one oak tree survived on the edge of the former **oak lēah** until the field received its name.

As shown in figure 1, the charter estate's boundary would come into contact with the edge of the oak woodland on its way to the next boundary marker. This is consistent with the wording of the charter's boundary clause. It does not indicate a route through or along the edge (eaves) of the wood, but instead simply says '... **to oak lēah**', which probably implies that the boundary made contact with the wood at just one well-defined location.

#### **from oak lēah to *lurdune***

The OE term *dune* means a hill, and the literal translation of *lus* is louse: an interpretation which previous investigators have found to be a singularly unhelpful. However, a more likely reading of this waypoint is that *lus-* is used in the sense of something small or insignificant<sup>17</sup>, thus ***lurdune*** probably means a small hill. There is indeed such a peak, now known as Burys Hill, a little way to the west of the supposed **oak lēah**.

#### **from *lurdune* to Sica's fortification**

A likely site for this waypoint is on the high ground to the south of Burys Hill, near the fields named Great Buckbury, Barn Buckbury, Lower Buckbury and Long Buckbury. The name ending '-bury' probably derives from the OE word *burh* meaning a defended site. Place names with a '-bury' ending sometimes, but not always, refer to a fortification on a hill. The geography of the vicinity would seem to make this a favourable position for a fortified settlement. The land falls away steeply to the south, and this location also has access to a potential water supply: a stream valley begins a few metres from this waypoint and eventually drains into the pools of Brake Mill Farm some 1200m to the south.

#### **from Sica's fortification to the street**

Here, **the street** is undoubtedly a reference to the first-century Roman road running NNW from Droitwich to Greensforge and Wroxeter. This forms the western boundary of Pedmore parish and part of the western boundary of Oldswinford. As the Roman road is an extended feature, the main question here relates to the route taken **from Sica's fortification to the street**. A route along the Pedmore parish boundary seems most likely, as this follows a natural boundary feature, along a gently sloping ridge down to the Roman road in the south-west corner of Pedmore parish.

That concludes the controversial southern boundary. The remainder of the boundary clause is less contentious, being somewhat simpler and following (roughly) the documented course of the ancient parish boundaries.

First we must travel **along (the) street to (the) boundary dyke**. As we have just seen, the **street** is the Roman road now partly overlain by County Lane and Sandy Lane. The **boundary dyke** was obviously an established feature at the time of the charter, perhaps delineating the western edge of Swinford or of an older estate to which Swinford once belonged. It is probably represented today, at least in part, by a pair of banks and ditches running along Wollaston Ridge, parallel to the modern parish and county boundaries. The earthworks here are of unknown age, but they are substantial and might originally have served some defensive purpose. It is possible that, in the 10th century, the **boundary dyke** extended further south than the surviving earthworks do today. For this reason we can't determine precisely where the **street** gave way to the **boundary dyke**, but it was probably somewhere between the present-day Westwood Avenue and Dunsley Road.

The charter estate's boundary seems to have lain close to the modern parish boundary in this region, the latter being straightened and 'formalised' much more recently, probably as a result of 18th century enclosures and later adjustments.

At the northern end of the **boundary dyke** the charter instructs us to travel **from (the) boundary dyke to (the) Stour**. The course taken was probably very similar to that of the modern county boundary - i.e. from the northern end of Wollaston Ridge along the line of the Dividale Brook to the river. From here we simply follow the Stour back to our starting point, **Swine Ford**.

So, that is my interpretation of the charter's boundary clause. In Part II of the article I will discuss what this and the manorial boundary patterns might tell us about the origin of the manors and parishes in this part of the Black Country.

[See page 39 for notes]

## Notes and References

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9. Grundy, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp73-74; Chambers, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp54-57; Hooke, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp164-165; Richardson, *op. cit.* in note 2, pp57-59; Pritchard, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp11-15.
10. James, *op. cit.* in note 8, pp1-38.
11. Grundy, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp73-74; Chambers *op. cit.* in note 5, p55.
12. James, *op. cit.* in note 8, p16.
13. Oldswinford Parish Register 'Bounds of the parish of Oldswinford', *Oldswinford Parish Register* III (1733), 133-134. Dudley Archives, Microfiche #304. An edited version of the latter document is reproduced in Chambers, *op. cit.* in note 5, pp43-45.
14. James, *op. cit.* in note 8, pp17-19.
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17. Smith, *op. cit.* in note 15, p28; James, *op. cit.* in note 8, pp21-22.