

Swinford: from Hwiccan borderland to English manor

- Part II

by Dr Kevin James

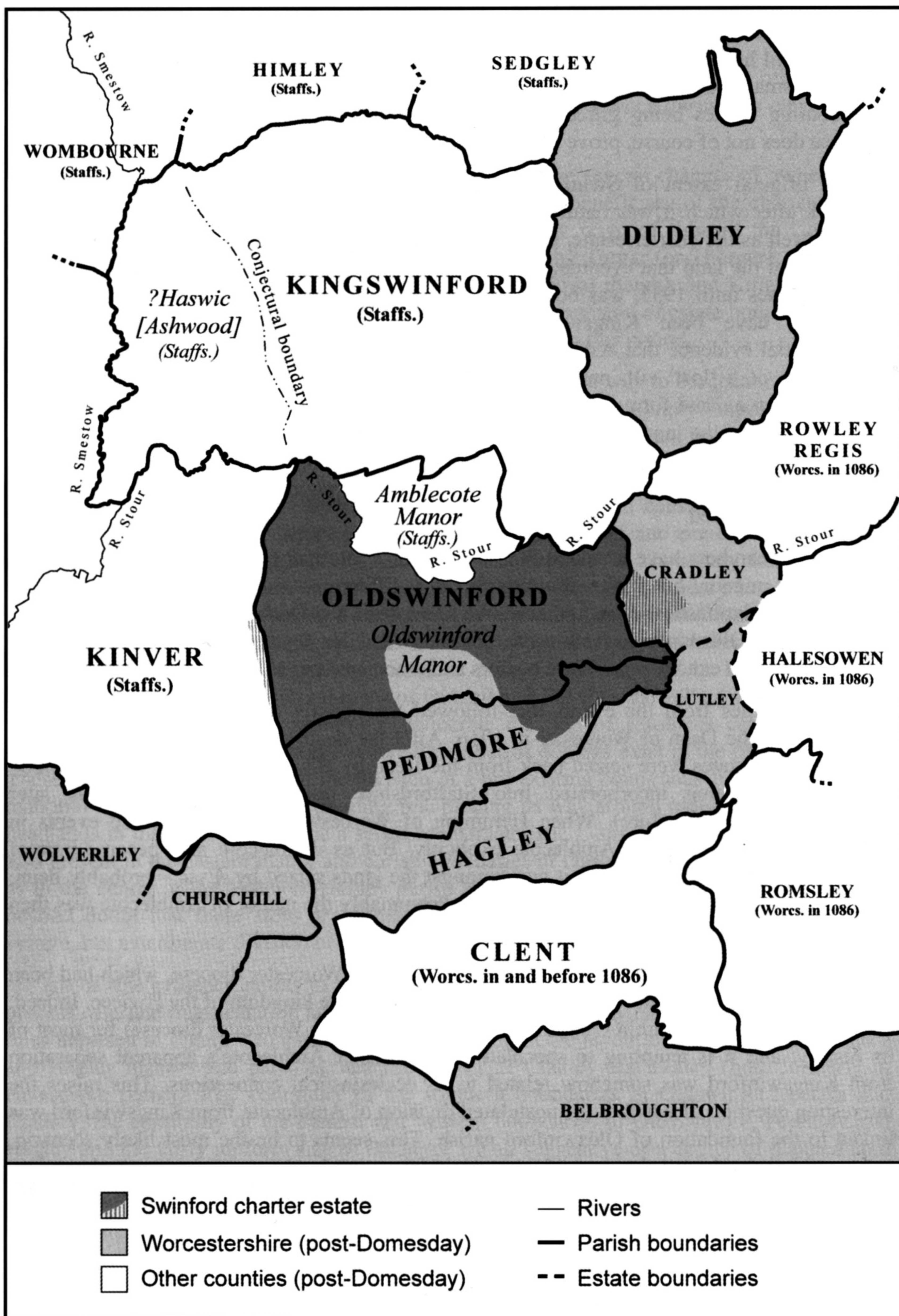
The first part of this article discussed a six-manse Anglo-Saxon estate that seems to have been carved out of the areas we now know as Kingswinford, Oldswinford and Pedmore. Its outline was described in a tenth-century royal charter; and by comparing this historical boundary perambulation with surviving landscape features, place-name evidence and eighteenth and nineteenth century maps of the area I was able to trace the course of boundary through the present-day landscape.

The outcome of my analysis was more than a little surprising. Like some of the charter's early researchers, I had initially supposed that the charter estate had been the direct precursor of Oldswinford manor and, therefore, I expected their respective boundaries to be very similar. But as we saw in Part I, they aren't! Notwithstanding that result, I think the new interpretation can be regarded with a reasonable degree of confidence. Its southern boundary, which previous researchers had been unable to fully trace, fits about twice as many of the boundary clause's descriptive elements as any previous interpretation. Moreover, it takes a logical and plausible route through the landscape, winding its way around entire Anglo-Saxon settlements and their associated agricultural land.

The most striking feature of the charter estate's boundary is that it excluded, as one unit, the settlement of Oldswinford (or whatever it was called then) and its cultivated land. The latter occupied about 150 acres – enough for two or three small farmsteads – and stretched between the Love Lane escarpment in the west and a long boundary dyke near Chawn Hill in the east.

More significantly, the area around Oldswinford settlement appears to have been just one part of a larger 'peninsula' of excluded land that also encompassed Wychbury hill fort, the cultivated fields of Pedmore and Hagley, and a tract of valuable oak woodland (the charter's **oak lēah**); all of which were distributed along the ancient roads linking Worcester and Droitwich to Stafford (and to the more ancient regional capital, Penkridge). Both roads appear to have been major and well used routes: the former being an iron-age (or earlier) salt-way; the latter a road of sufficient import to have been paved near Oldswinford at the time of the charter. Indeed, it is likely that both roads played a pivotal role in the development of settlements and estates along their route. Perhaps Oldswinford, Pedmore and Hagley, as well as Wychbury hill fort and **oak lēah**, belonged to a single land unit established around this ancient road network. This land unit might even have been part of the pre-charter Swinford. Unfortunately there is no documentary evidence to clarify its status or ownership at this time, but it seems probable that much of the surrounding area belonged to the crown.

Clent is known to have been a royal manor at the time of the Domesday survey. Indeed it was the *caput*, or central place, of the royal estate from which the Clent hundred had taken its name a century or more earlier. Moreover, during the reign of King Ethelred (AD 978/9-1016), Kingswinford, Clent and Tardebigge were sold to Ægelsius, Dean of Worcester, by the King, so they were clearly all royal land prior to this sale. But what was the status of the land sandwiched between Swinford and Clent (i.e. Hagley and those parts of Pedmore that appear to have been excluded from the charter estate)? Again royal ownership seems the most likely scenario, particularly when one considers John Hemingway's, speculation¹ on the bisection of Wychbury hill fort by the parish and manor boundary: "*Perhaps Pedmore and Hagley to the south had been royal land given the division of [Wychbury] hill fort between the two*".



The local pattern of ancient parishes and manors (outlines as documented on nineteenth-century maps) with county associations indicated. The dark shaded area represents the putative Swinford charter estate.

Courtesy the Author

Thus, it is conceivable that, prior to the charter, all of the land between Clent and Kingswinford had been held by the crown. The Swinford charter obviously represents a gift of just a small part of this land. (There is no record in the Anglo-Saxon charters of neighbouring estates being gifted away to the king's faithful, although lack of surviving evidence does not of course, prove that such grants weren't made.)

The original extent of Swinford is unknown, but given the localised nature of the landmark after which it was named, it seems unlikely that it occupied a particularly large area. As well as the charter estate, and *perhaps* Pedmore and Hagley, it probably included at least some of the land that eventually became the ancient parish of Kingswinford which, for many centuries until 1935, was bounded by the River Smestow in the west. The Smestow might not have been Kingswinford's pre-Domesday boundary however. There is circumstantial evidence that Ashwood – which was in Kingswinford until 1935 – might be the location of a 'lost' vill, named Eswich in a charter of AD 994-5 and Haswic in the Domesday survey, and formerly held by the Canons of Wolverhampton church. It may have included much of the land that subsequently became Ashwood Hay. Whilst the shape of the tenth-century boundary line depicted in Figure 1 is conjectural², the possibility that Kingswinford (and hence, perhaps, Swinford) did not originally extend to the Smestow should not be ignored.

Some researchers have assumed that the charter estate had been the direct precursor of Oldswinford manor, but given the significantly different outlines of the two, a simple evolutionary relationship seems unlikely. We know from the Domesday survey that by 1086 Kingswinford, Oldswinford, Amblecote, Pedmore and Hagley were distinct and separate manors, but when exactly were these manors and associated parishes formed?

A clue comes from the events that followed the transfer of Kingswinford, Clent and Tardebigge to the Dean of Worcester in 1016. After the death of King Ethelred later in that year, all three estates were seized back from the Dean by Ævic, Sheriff of Stafford, thereby eventually becoming incorporated into Staffordshire (although Tardebigge was later transferred to Warwickshire). When Hemming of Worcester documented these events in c1095, he did not mention Amblecote explicitly. But as Amblecote also became part of Staffordshire, it seems likely that it was amongst the lands seized by Ævic – probably being at that time, an integral part of Kingswinford. Presumably the manor of Amblecote was then carved out of Kingswinford some time after 1016.

Despite the 1016 seizure, Amblecote remained in the Worcester diocese, which had been formed some time between AD 663 and AD 680 to serve the kingdom of the Hwicce. Indeed, the manor has resided within Oldswinford parish (part of the Worcester diocese) for most of its history; and it is tempting to speculate upon whether Amblecote's apparent separation from Kingswinford was somehow related to its ecclesiastical connections. This raises the interesting question of whether the postulated division of Amblecote from Kingswinford was linked to the foundation of Oldswinford parish. This seems to be the most likely scenario, and would probably put the date of the latter's formation – and perhaps also the boundary changes that gave rise to the neighbouring Pedmore parish – at some time after AD 1016. This might also be indicative of the dates at which the parish churches of St Mary's, Oldswinford and St Peter's, Pedmore were established.

So, it seems that the local manors and parishes probably post-date the charter by at least sixty years. Indeed, if the manor and parish boundaries had been in existence before the charter, it would be highly unlikely for the charter estate to have included every part of the parish other than its main settlement centre, let alone for it to take in part of a neighbouring

estate (Cradley) as well. Such a chronology is consistent with evidence from other parts of the Midlands and elsewhere that many parishes came into existence during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The charter estate and surrounding land must have seen several changes of ownership in the century or so leading up to the Norman invasion: the beneficiary of the charter (in AD 951 to 959) was Burhelm; and prior to 1066, during the reign of Edward the Confessor, (Old)Swinford manor was owned by Wulfwin; Pedmore by Turgar (or Thorger); Amblecote by two individuals of Earl Algar; Hagley by Godric (a royal theign), and Kingswinford by King Edward himself. There is clearly plenty of scope for revision of estate boundaries along with the various changes of ownership that took place during this period.

But what was the process by which the charter estate gave way to the local manors? Was it a gradual evolution or were the new manorial boundaries simply imposed upon the landscape, ignoring the old charter estate? A comparison of the relevant boundary lines might provide some insight.

The Swinford charter and medieval manor bounds appear to coincide only where they follow features such as the River Stour, ridges of high ground and pre-existing boundary dykes – all prominent elements of the landscape where reuse of old boundary features should not be unexpected. Elsewhere though, completely new manorial boundary lines must have been drawn. Whereas the Swinford charter estate enclosed (or excluded) entire settlements and their associated agricultural land, the later manor and parish boundaries appear to have been designed to divide field systems and other important elements of the landscape in two. This is apparent in the agricultural areas of Oldnall and Foxcote, as well as at Wychbury hill fort. Another example of a seemingly deliberate division of resources can be observed between Oldswinford and Pedmore where a number of doglegs exist in the parish boundary. These almost certainly represent the division of a pre-existing contiguous field system by the manorial / parish boundary: the dividing line picking its way around individual furlongs and headlands in the fields to produce a series of characteristic L-shaped steps. Similar steps are also present in the eastern manor and parish boundaries of Oldswinford and Pedmore, as well as in the centre of the Pedmore-Hagley parish/manor boundary. It has not been determined beyond doubt that these steps are contemporary with the founding of the local manorial system, but a deliberate division of resources between the new manors does seem likely.

All of this evidence points to a planned re-apportionment of land rather than a gradual process of estate fragmentation and aggregation. Indeed, one only has to look at the boundary lines depicted in Figure 1 to gain a sense of planning in the layout of Oldswinford, Pedmore and Hagley manors and parishes, and the estates of Cradley and Lutley (both formerly in Halesowen parish). The continuity of the southern boundaries of Oldswinford parish and Cradley; the continuity of the eastern and western boundaries of Oldswinford, Pedmore and Hagley and the fairly uniform size of the latter are all suggestive of a degree of planned land allocation rather than of mere piecemeal granting of estates. This might even indicate that all five land units shared a common mechanism, or date of origin. Such a widespread territorial restructuring could only have been organised from a position of high authority; and it seems probable that the charter estate somehow lost its identity as a result of the imposition of these new manorial divisions.

The relationship between the Swinford charter estate and the later manorial system is fascinating, but can the charter also tell us anything about what came before? Well, in conjunction with other information, it can certainly help. Most obviously it tells us that at

least parts of Kingswinford and Oldswinford (and *perhaps* Pedmore and Hagley as well) probably once belonged to the same land unit: Swinford.

The shape of the charter estate's boundary also seems to reinforce the notion that the configuration of through roads in the area played a pivotal role in influencing not only the local settlement distribution, but also the pattern of estate ownership and fragmentation along their length. This is a particularly interesting observation here because the area around Swinford (i.e. around the pre-1974 northern boundary of Worcestershire) seems to have been an ancient border-land separating iron-age tribes as well as Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The Anglo-Saxon period was, of course, a time of great change. There were numerous battles between the Germanic invaders and native British tribes as well as between the different factions of Angle, Saxon and Jutish settlers themselves. With frontiers in constant flux, new kingdoms became established; many existing for just a short period before becoming incorporated into larger territories. One such kingdom was that of the Hwicce, which occupied much of what was later to become Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Warwickshire. The kingdom seems to have arisen in the late 6th century, perhaps being created by a small group of Germanic elite to administer the native British tribes of the area. (It seems that the incomers probably integrated into the existing population rather than displacing them in great numbers.) In AD 628 the Hwicce became a sub-kingdom of Mercia and, two centuries later, the Hwiccan rulers lost all control of their lands to their more powerful neighbour. The Hwiccan identity remained for some considerable time however. Even as late as the tenth century, when many of the minor Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been subsumed into what was gradually becoming England, the bishops of the Worcester diocese were still referring to themselves as *episcopi Hwicciorum*. Several other late tenth- and eleventh-century references to the Hwicce are also known.³

The outline of the former kingdom has since been preserved in the shape of the Worcester diocese and (in part) the county of Worcestershire which, in many places, shared the same boundary line. There have been some changes, however, and it has been argued by Dr PW King⁴ that the areas we now know as Kinver, Dudley, Rowley Regis, Kingswinford, and Oldswinford formerly lay within Hwiccan territory. Moreover, there seems to have been a long-standing connection between at least some of these places and estates lying deeper within the former Hwiccan kingdom. Rowley Regis was a chapelry dependent on Clent; and the Domesday book records that the renders for Kinver, Clent and Tardebigge were all paid at Kingswinford. The most likely reason for such a practice is that all four estates were, at one time, in common ownership (an inference that we might also make from the events of 1016 described previously). Clent, Tardebigge and Kingswinford all lie adjacent to the same ancient network of through roads, and it is possible that there are much older links between these estates – and hence the pre-charter Swinford. These land units may, at one time, have been parts of a much larger Hwiccan (or even Romano-British) estate that started to break up many years before the date of the Swinford charter, the charter representing only one step in the extended process of fragmentation.

There are also hints of territorial continuity with even earlier periods. The relative abundance of hill forts (such as that on Wychbury hill) just a few miles inside Dr King's postulated Hwiccan boundary seems to indicate that the late iron-age predecessor of the Hwicce – the Dobunni tribe – controlled a defensive frontier zone⁵ that would have encompassed the whole of the later Swinford. The persistence, over more than two millennia, of such a zone, crystallised successively into the boundaries of Romano-British tribal regions or *pagi*, Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, ecclesiastical dioceses and, eventually, English counties, is striking.

The early history of the area is clearly a multifaceted story. It is not yet fully understood, but there is no doubt that the Swinford charter is one of the most important documents we have on the subject, and a detailed analysis of it can only help to clarify the origins of this fascinating corner of England and the Black Country.

Notes and References

1. J Hemingway, *Township Maps* (2005-6), Historic Environment Team, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, PDF documents downloadable from:
<http://www.dudley.gov.uk/environment-planning/planning/historic-environment/historic-maps-of-dudley/?locale=en>).
2. K James, *The Swinford charter (S579) of AD 951-9: A new interpretation of the boundary clause and thoughts on the origin of Oldswinford and Pedmore parishes* (2013), PDF document downloadable from: <http://www.swinfordcharter.kjdocs.co.uk/>, p3.
3. D Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape - The Kingdom of the Hwicce* (1985), Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp13-15.
4. PW King, 'The minster *Aet Stur* in Husmere and the northern boundary of the Hwicce', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 3S XV (1996), pp77-82.
5. King, op. cit. in note 20, pp82-85.