

# OLD WOKING'S ANGLO-SAXON 'HISTORY'

Many people view the coming of the Romans as the end of the 'prehistoric', but although there is undoubtedly written 'history' from that period, none of it relates directly to our area and as we have seen in the last essay, our knowledge of the Romans in Woking is scant.

As we enter the 'Dark Ages' there is very little archaeological evidence from the entire period between the Romans leaving and the Normans arriving and the historical record (if it is to be believed) is not that illuminating either.

In 1904, a 4" long lance head was 'dug out of the moat round the wood at Woking Park Farm'<sup>1</sup>. It was dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and has subsequently been 'credibly interpreted as a votive deposition'<sup>2</sup> - despite the find-spot being in a presumed 13<sup>th</sup> century moat!



In 2018 an iron spear<sup>3</sup> dated to between 550-650 AD, was found in the river near Newark Priory – the blade (left) bent into a curve before being deposited in the stream, was again presumed as a votive offering, and nearby in the fields off Newark Lane a silver/pale gold coin (right)<sup>4</sup> dated to about 675-680 AD, was also found in 1997 by a metal detectorists. It is not known who the bearded 'ruler' depicted on the obverse side of



the coin was – if only the coin could talk, it might be able to answer the age-old question of 'when was Surrey created and by whom'?

I briefly touched on that question back in 2014 in my article 'In Search of Saxon Surrey', before looking at the early 'history' of Chertsey Abbey<sup>5</sup> and the Monastery at Woking<sup>6</sup> - in the Chronological History section of this website.

The name 'Woking' has been through many grammatical incarnations over the centuries, with its earliest form thought to be something like 'UUocingas' (there being no 'W', just a double 'U' in the alphabet at the time).

There are two parts to the name - 'UUocc' – and – 'ingas' – the second part generally being interpreted to mean 'the settlement of the people of', with the first part being the personal name of a head-figure (in old terms a 'tribal leader') called 'UUocc' (or possibly 'UUocca').

When the 'Woccingas' first settled and gave their name to this area is debatable<sup>8</sup>. It is obvious they were not the first people here (so the area could have had an earlier name), but exactly where the 'here' was is debatable too. At one stage the name 'Woking' applied not just to the small area we now know as Old Woking, and not even to just the larger manor or parish of that name, but to an administrative area known in medieval times as the 'Hundred of Woking' that stretched from East Horsley in the east to Ash in the west<sup>9</sup>.

Whilst some clearly believe that the 'Hundred' of Woking was formed as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it does not necessarily follow that the original 'Woking' exactly corresponded with it. I believe that originally 'Woking' covered much of north-west Surrey, until sometime before the Norman Conquest when the area was divided into two separate 'Hundreds' called Woking and 'Godley' (based on the lands of Chertsey Abbey).

Most historians seem to believe, that Chertsey Abbey was founded before the name Woking was first recorded, but even if it does, it does not follow that any settlement of Chertsey is necessarily older than that at Woking.

Not everyone is convinced by Chertsey's claim, and the main authority on Surrey in this period, John Blair, points out that 'Woking and Chertsey Hundreds are clearly divisions of an earlier whole, for a wedge of Chertsey Hundred cuts off Windlesham, a detached common pasture of Woking Hundred and manor'<sup>10</sup>. He goes on to note that 'it is a fair deduction that these two Hundreds formed a district identified from an early date with the tribe of the Woccingas, comparable in size and shape to the adjoining Berkshire regions of the Sunningas and Readingas', and indeed probably the Godalmingas to the south.

Rob Briggs<sup>11</sup> questions Blair's conclusions on the early Anglo-Saxon territorial division of Surrey, pointing out that whilst 'there is a good case for the Woccingas forming a territorial unit' – 'it is not possible to say that it was a regio', noting that 'Blair's model is a synthesis of evidence from various times, rather than definitive over a longer period, and at best is unlikely to have been more than briefly accurate'.

The other thing that needs noting is the assumption that Old Woking was the 'capital' of UUocca's lands. Up to now there is no archaeological evidence to support this, and it is possible that the original 'centre' was elsewhere.

It is generally accepted that the earliest reference to Woking relates to a monastery founded in the territory of the 'Wocchingas', often presumed to be on or near the site of the present St Peter's Church in Old Woking<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> p140 (Elsley 1912)

<sup>2</sup> (Briggs 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), SUR-OEC561. 'early medieval iron spear with a characteristic conical split shaft and lozenge shaped tapering blade. The socket is circular in profile. It is bent to 130mm long, with an estimated original length of around 170mm.

<sup>4</sup> PAS, SUR-075EFS, An incomplete coin with a cross and annulets in a beaded circle on the reverse

<sup>5</sup> For more information of Chertsey Abbey see (Corner 1858), (Pocock, Chertsey Abbey 1858), (Pocock, Some Account of the Encaustic Tiles and Stone Coffins Excavated on the Site of Chertsey Abbey in 1855 1858), (Shurlock 1885), (Wheeler 1905), (Surrey Record Society 1915), (Jenkinson and White 1915), (Surrey Record Society 1928), (Surrey Record Society 1933), (Surrey Record Society 1933), (Nevill 1935), (Surrey Record Society 1937), (Surrey Record Society 1954), (Surrey Record Society 1958), (Surrey Record Society 1963), (Poulton 1988)

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Woking's Monastery see (Christophers n.d.), (Kelly, Charters of Peterborough Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters, 14 2009 (reprinted 2013))

<sup>7</sup> p156 (Gover, Mawer and Stenton 1934)

<sup>8</sup> p11 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014) quoting Robin Chalkley's article in their August and October Newsletters (35 & 36) in 1975 on 'The Coming of Woccc' in which he points out the lack of a pagan burial ground could be evidence that 'Woccc and his people did not appear until the expansion of Christian Wessex after 635 under its king Cynegils'.

<sup>9</sup> p4 (Robertson 2002 (revised June 2003) – 'Old Woking was situated at the focal point of a territorial unit which extended across the middle Wey valley from the North Downs to the Chobham Ridges above the Blackwater valley. This territorial unit became formalised as the Hundred of Woking in the 8<sup>th</sup> century'.

<sup>10</sup> p14 (Blair 1991)

<sup>11</sup> (Balmer 2012)

# OLD WOKING'S ANGLO-SAXON 'HISTORY'

In 1982 Woking Historian, Alan Crosby, stated that the monastery at Woking was 'said to have been founded c.675 by Brordar, a nobleman<sup>13</sup>. In 1997 the Church Historian, Mervyn Blatch<sup>14</sup>, repeated the claim, as did local writer and historian Marion Field in her 2005 book 'A Walk Around Historic Woking<sup>15</sup>'. Earlier she had claimed that Brordar had founded the monastery in 625 AD<sup>16</sup>, a date she repeated in 2017 when she compiled her book 'Woking in 50 Buildings', noting then that 'an eighteenth (sic) century document refers to a minster founded by Brorder<sup>17</sup>'.

Whilst most historians accept that a monastery could have been founded by about 680 AD<sup>18</sup>, nobody other than Messrs Crosby, Blatch, & Field has placed its foundation as early as 675 AD (let alone 625 AD).

In 2001 local historian Phillip Arnold went further<sup>19</sup>, and claimed that St Peter's Church 'was originally a minister church probably from 675 AD having in the past a far larger parish than existed even than in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries'

The most accepted date for the first reference to Woking, however, is the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. That was when Constantine (who was Pope between 708-715 AD) is alleged to have sent a letter to Hedda, Abbot of Woking, confirming certain privileges to the monastery at 'Wocchingas'<sup>20</sup>. Even then the evidence for such a letter is only contained in a 12<sup>th</sup> century manuscript formerly belonging to Peterborough Abbey, in which a monk stated that Medhamstede (the Saxon monastic forerunner to Peterborough), established 'colonies' at Bermondsey and Woking – copying the 8<sup>th</sup> century letter to back up his claim.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Peterborough had little or nothing to gain from its claim for the foundation of Woking, but about the same time the monks of our near neighbour Chertsey Abbey had everything to gain from their assertion that their monastery was founded before Woking. Indeed it is only from generally accepted 12<sup>th</sup> century forgeries that we have any evidence of Chertsey being founded in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century!

Susan Kelly – the expert on early medieval monastic muniments – who has published books on both Peterborough and Chertsey Abbey's charters (to name just two), notes in the introduction to her work on Chertsey that 'it's pre-Conquest archive is fairly small and has a poor reputation, the majority of the sixteen extant charters are obvious fabrications<sup>21</sup>. Even as long ago as 1918 Frank Stenton noted 'the Old English charters of Chertsey Abbey all carry a heavy weight of suspicion which most of them only too well deserve'<sup>22</sup>.

I do not want to dwell on the dubious 'history' of Chertsey Abbey here (I think I covered it enough in 2014), and for anybody seriously interested in the subject I would first of all direct them to Susan Kelly's excellent book on the charters, Rob Poulton's book on the archaeological excavations, and the displays at Chertsey Museum (as well as the numerous books listed in the bibliography on the subject).

As I say, most historians agree on the date 708-715 AD for the foundation of Woking's monastery by monks from Medehamstede, but clearly not all. The Woking History Society, in their 'blog' on their website, seem to believe that the monks came originally from Chertsey Abbey<sup>23</sup>!

About 1300 years ago monks came from Chertsey and built a church, probably where Old Woking church is now, to serve the whole district.

As for Crosby, Blatch & Field's nobleman Brordar, I wonder whether he was related in some way to the earldoman Brorda<sup>24</sup>, who (along with Abbot Pusa of Woking) in about 780 AD petitioned King Offa to free the church of his at Woking 'from all obligations due to the king and to bishop and to earl and to all men, so that no one should have any authority there, except St Peter and the abbot'<sup>25</sup>.

Whilst again this is a 12<sup>th</sup> century copy of a now lost 8<sup>th</sup> century document, Stubbs was 'not inclined to doubt its authenticity'<sup>26</sup> Stenton suggests the charter is 'ancient, and there is no difficulty in assigning it to Offa's reign'<sup>27</sup>, and Kelly believes it to be 'a fundamentally authentic diploma of King Offa in favour of a minster at Woking'<sup>28</sup>. Again as Peterborough (or Medehamstede) is not even mentioned, there was nothing for the Abbey to gain from recording Offa's grant in their cartulary.

The same cannot be said for another charter ('modelled on a genuine charter of Offa<sup>29</sup>') relating to Chertsey Abbey in 787, or for an earlier charter of 727<sup>30</sup> whereby Frithuwold and Eorcenwold allegedly granted to Chertsey eight hides of land at Byfleet and Weybridge (amongst many other manors mainly in Surrey, but also in Hampshire and Berkshire)<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> p4 (Robertson 2002 (revised June 2003) – 'There is a reasonable case for this monastery to have survived as a secular minster (Woking being one of four Surrey minsters at a very early date), and it is identified with the church on the Domesday royal manor'. And p11 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014) 'In the absence of any other evidence it must be assumed that the original minster lay on the site of the present church of St Peter'.

<sup>13</sup> p4 (Crosby, A History of Woking 1982), but revised in his later edition, p7 (Crosby, A History of Woking 2003)

<sup>14</sup> p218 (Blatch 1997)

<sup>15</sup> pP3 (Field, Walk Around Historic Woking 2005)

<sup>16</sup> p10 (Field, Woking, A History & Celebration 2004)

<sup>17</sup> p7 (Field, Woking in 50 Buildings 2017)

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Locke had suggested 680 AD in 'Woking becomes Mercian and Christian, 661AD to 823 AD' (Locke n.d.), as has Richard and Pamela Savage in their latest report for the Surrey Archaeological Society Bulletin (Savage and Savage 2021).

<sup>19</sup> p13 (Arnold 2001)

<sup>20</sup> For a translation, see (Christophers n.d.) and for a copy of the Latin and a more detailed discussion (Kelly, Charters of Peterborough Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters, 14 2009 (reprinted 2013)) p361-363

<sup>21</sup> p1 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>22</sup> p435 (Stenton, The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings 1918)

<sup>23</sup> (Woking History Society 2021)

<sup>24</sup> Sometimes written as 'Brora' – p11 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014) 'In a further charter of between 775 and 785 at the request of the ealdorman Brora, King Offa confirmed to Pusa, the Abbot of Peterborough that Woking church would be freed from any obligations except to the abbey, and also gave Woking church twenty hides in the place where the minster lies'.

<sup>25</sup> For a translation, see (Christophers n.d.) and (Thorpe 1861) p46, with a copy of the Latin and a more detailed discussion in (Kelly, Charters of Peterborough Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters, 14 2009 (reprinted 2013)) p198-202

<sup>26</sup> p205 (Stubbs 1861, September)

<sup>27</sup> p323 (Stenton, Medeshamstede and its Colonies 1933)

<sup>28</sup> p9 (Kelly, Charters of Peterborough Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters, 14 2009 (reprinted 2013))

<sup>29</sup> p11 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>30</sup> W H Stevenson in his article 'Trinoda Necessitas in the English Historical Review, Volume 29, Number 166, October 1914, p689-703, noting it is dubious or spurious, with Kelly, p116 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015) noting it as a 'clear fabrication'.

## OLD WOKING'S ANGLO-SAXON 'HISTORY'

What happened to the monastery at Woking after Offa's time is unknown, but it is presumed by many to have been destroyed sometime in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century by a Danish raid - possibly the same one that destroyed Chertsey Abbey – or even Peterborough<sup>32</sup> (although personally I cannot believe that the latter would have been likely).

In the raid on Chertsey, depending on which dubious account you wish to believe, either ninety or one-hundred-and-ninety monks were killed (including the Abbot, Beocca and a priest called Edor)<sup>33</sup>. The monks of Chertsey claimed it to have happened in 884 'in the time of King Æthelred, son of King Æthelwulf, after whose death reigned Alfred, son of Æthelwulf<sup>34</sup>', but if that is the case then they must have got confused, as by 884 A.D., Alfred was already on the throne!

Kelly points out that 'one possible solution would be to assume that Chertsey was sacked in the time of Æthelred and then rebuilt in 884<sup>35</sup>', but as she later points out 'it is worth bearing in mind that the relatively voluminous sources for King Alfred's life do not mention any re-foundation at Chertsey<sup>36</sup>'.

She also notes that 'a cynical view might be that the whole story of a massacre was concocted at a later date' – pointing out that 'it might be significant that only two Anglo-Saxon churches are known to have encouraged a cult of monks supposedly massacred by the 'heathens' in the ninth century: Chertsey and Medehamstede!

Could it also be significant, with the destruction of Woking's monastery about this time, that the supposed charter by King Alfred to Chertsey Abbey, which Kelly describes as a 'clear forgery<sup>37</sup>', claims lands much closer to Woking<sup>38</sup> than anything claimed in their earlier, equally dubious, deeds?

The charter by King Athelstan in 933<sup>39</sup> claims that Woodham was part of their estate, over twenty years before the settlement is included within the bounds of Pyrford, which was subsequently granted to Westminster Abbey (see my 2014 article on 'Beating the Bounds of Pyrford<sup>40</sup>')

Another confirmation of privileges and land to Chertsey by king Edgar in 967<sup>41</sup> includes reference to five hides of land at Chobham with Busseleghe (Bisley), and five hides at Byfleet with Weybridge, the grant being described by Kelly as 'essentially identical to that in the name of Edward the Confessor' (of 1062) 'although there are significant differences in the details of estates<sup>42</sup>'.

As mentioned above, in 956 King Eadwig granted to Eadric land at 'Pyrianforda', with his charter clearly setting out the bounds of the estate<sup>43</sup>. Starting from the 'ford by a pear tree' (believed to be below St Nicholas' Church where the bridge over the Bourne is now), the southern boundary of Pyrford was then presumably the northern boundary of Woking, and the northern boundary of Pyrford the southern boundary of Chertsey – although only a few of the places mentioned can be easily identified

As for Woking, Blair points out that 'there is a reasonable prima facie case that this monastery [at Woking] survived, as a secular minster, to be identified with the church on the Domesday royal manor<sup>44</sup> – a theory supported by Robertson who claimed 'the establishment of Old Woking as a permanent settlement in this location is due to a number of factors, including its status as a royal hundredal manor from the pre-Conquest period, its location within the centre of the ancient Hundred, and the siting of a 7<sup>th</sup> century monastery here which probably survived as the minster church, which itself probably continued as the parish church of St Peter at Old Woking<sup>45</sup>'.

Blair also notes that 'there are now strong indications that many, perhaps most of the English kingdoms had acquired a coherent system of parochiae by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is therefore perfectly possible that most of the Surrey minsters were as old as this, though specific evidence only exists in the cases of Chertsey, Farnham, Woking and Bermondsey<sup>46</sup>'.

The problem is that with doubts about the authenticity of the documents, and little archaeological evidence to go on, we really are in the dark when it comes to the 'history' of Dark-Age Woking.

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<sup>31</sup> Kelly suggests that the grant by Edward the Confessor of 1062 'may have been the first of these documents to be forged' with King Edgar's grant of 967 'being produced subsequently' and Frithuwulf's grant of 727, 'perhaps at a later date', p116 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>32</sup> P11 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014) 'some commentators have suggested that the original church succumbed to the Danish invasions and destruction of the 9th century at the same time as its own home monastery of Peterborough. However, while Peterborough was re-founded as Burch by Bishop Aethelwold in 963 there is no mention of Woking in the new royal charter of foundation, either as a church or a source of income for the monastery.'

<sup>33</sup> p15 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>34</sup> p15 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>35</sup> p16 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>36</sup> p17 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>37</sup> p16 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>38</sup> p11 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014) notes that Robin Chalkley suggested that Chertsey's charter of 889 'sets its bounds further south than the original Chertsey charter of 666 as if to take in lands left unclaimed after the fall of the Woking minster'

p79 (Corner 1858) gives the bounds of the charter, which include land at Crocford and Woodham

<sup>39</sup> p135-141 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015), p136 'another of the Chertsey forgeries in which an Anglo-Saxon king makes a wholesale confirmation of the libertas of the monastery's estates'.

<sup>40</sup> (Ashington Bullen 1905)

<sup>41</sup> p141-148 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>42</sup> p143 (Kelly, Charters of Chertsey Abbey - Anglo-Saxon Charters - 19 2015)

<sup>43</sup> p50-52 (Ashington Bullen 1905), which contains the original Latin bounds together with a translation of the charter by 'Mr A Bilderbeck of Oxford'. The Latin text can also be found in Walter De Gray Birch's 'Cartularium Saxonicum' Vol III (Published by Charles J Clark in 1893), p136-7.

<sup>44</sup> p95 (Blair 1991)

<sup>45</sup> p4-5 (Robertson 2002 (revised June 2003)

<sup>46</sup> p103 (Blair 1991)

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