

The Barony of Wooler and the Feudal Estates in North Northumberland in the 12th and 13th Centuries

Talk by Derek Sharman. 9th February 2022

What was going on in Wooler and Glendale in Norman times and who controlled what happened in our area in mid-medieval times? This has always been something of a mystery, as, unlike the rest of England, there is no Domesday book record to give us an account to build on. Derek Sharman has been exploring the records to help fill this gap and, in this talk, he shared his thoughts with Glendale Local History Society. The Earldom of Northumbria had once stretched across a wide area from the Tees to the Firth of Forth, but by the time the Normans came in 1066, it consisted of Durham and Northumberland, with a boundary between England and Scotland beginning to settle along the Tweed. Initially, the Normans under William the Conqueror had accepted the loyalty of the Saxon Earl, but when the latter switched to the Scottish king, his lands were devastated in a second 'harrying of the North' in 1080 (the first harrying had been of Yorkshire in 1069). Although some Saxon families were able to retain control over their lands, this must have been a very hard time for many in our area. In the reign of Henry 1st, however, things began to settle down. To promote this stabilisation, the king in 1107 created two new baronies in North Northumberland, one in Wooler and the other at Wark on the Tweed. This complemented the existing Earldom of Bamburgh, once the seat of the Earl of Northumbria, and the 'ecclesiastical liberties', lands associated with the inheritance of St Cuthbert, now attached to the lands of the Prince Bishop of Durham.

Our speaker explained that North Northumberland became a patchwork of different types of medieval landholdings. In Anglo-Saxon times, all land belonged to whoever was the king. The King's earls owed him duties of loyalty and support, a system which then escalated through lesser ranks. The Normans elaborated such arrangements into the sophisticated categories which we know as the feudal system. Some lands were directly held by the Crown, with all dues in service, in kind and in cash going to the King. Elsewhere, the king operated with different forms of sub-contracting. In our area, the lands linked to the Bishopric of Durham were controlled through laws and courts organised by the Bishop, and all feudal dues went to Durham. The area of Northumberland and Islandshire was managed in this way. In some cases, the old Saxon families were allowed to carry on managing their lands, so long as dues were paid to the King, usually via the Earl of Bamburgh. Lands around Etal were held in a form of 'thegnage', and those from North and South Middleton to Roddam in a form of 'drennage'. A barony was somewhere in between in status. Barons could not make laws and had to pay fees to the king (representing the services of a number of knights), but could set up other fee-paying services, such as establishing mills and creating 'burghs', market places which in turn paid fees. Within this framework, most lesser folk worked as 'bondmen' to someone above them, or as serfs to bondmen or lords.

The Barony of Wooler, by the early 13th Century, covered a swathe of land from the hills to the sea. Wooler itself was in the south west corner. It looks as if this territory included lands not already claimed by the ecclesiastical liberties and the thegnages and drengages. From 1107 until the mid 13th Century, the Barony was held by the Muschamps family. These came originally from Normandy, but the first Baron, Robert, seems to have been born in the Midlands just after the Conquest. During this time, the lands in our area began to recover from the disruption of the conquest and subsequent 'harrying'. Investments were made in stocking Glendale with oxen, cattle, sheep and horses, and in

1199, Wooler was established as a 'burgh'. Never fortified, by the early 13th Century, the 'demesne' or manor, of Wooler itself, one of several in the Barony, was recorded as having 114 burgesses, paying rents to the Baron, along with fees for charging tolls, setting up stalls in the market place and paying for court business in the town court. The Muschamp family seem to have been reasonable overlords, though in the 1170s Robert's grandson Thomas joined the Scottish king William the Lion in besieging Alnwick Castle. This rebellion being defeated, he had to flee, during which time the Barony was managed by the Sheriff of Northumberland. Thomas's son Robert was allowed to reclaim the Barony. Wooler flourished under his management and that of his son, another Robert, becoming a centre for the wool trade. But, as with many families at this time, there were only daughters left to succeed to the Barony. The lands were increasingly divided among the different families into which the daughters had married – de Fords, Greys and Herons, and the Barony of Wooler fades from view. The prosperity of the area also began to decline, as tension built up between the Kings of Scotland and England for control of the area, ending with Edward I's capture of Berwick in 1296. With national armies marching back and forth across the area, the returns from farming and from trading must have fallen. Then, in the 14th Century, conditions got worse with bad harvests and the plague added to the difficulties. From then on, our area becomes a contested border zone, with its distinctive history of reiver feuding and depopulation.

Derek Sharman gave us a helpful window into the complexities of life in the two centuries following 1066, during which those working the land had to provide a share of produce, work their lord's land for a set number of days, and sometimes pay fees in cash as well. Not quite slaves, working people had to get permission from the lord to travel outside the area and to get married, all generating yet more payments in cash and kind to the lord. We were left with many questions, particularly about the town of Wooler – its origins, its scale, what was traded in the market, and its place in the defensive structure of the area. Archival records for this period are sparse and we were very grateful to our speaker for giving us a flavour of what he has been able to discover so far.