

# The Vill of Purton

*By Joseph Wright*

Being situated within a prized ancient forest and close to the borders of the feudal kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex, it was inevitable that the lands which would ultimately become the Parish of Purton were hard fought over and changed hands a number of times.

Our earliest documented glimpse into these land exchanges at Purton date to as early as the late 7<sup>th</sup> c. when it is alleged that lands east of Braydon [Forest] were granted to Malmesbury Abbey.

Our evidence for this is based on the recounts of William of Malmesbury and the pancarta dated 1065, where it is inferred that Purton was originally granted to Malmesbury by the Wessex king Cædwalla who reigned for the brief period AD 685–688. This statement is presumably based on Cædwalla's charter of 688.

*AD 688 (19 Aug.). Cædwalla, king, to Aldhelm, abbot; grant of 140 hides (manentes) on both sides of the wood called Kemele (Kemble, Gloucs.), 30 on the east side of the wood of Braydon, Wilts., and 5 at the confluence of the rivers Avon and Wylve. (S234)*

The authenticity of this charter is dubious though, with its stated hidage (area) and no reference to Purton in name but may indeed be drawn upon an even earlier charter. Lands at Purton and Tetbury were connected in later grants and it may be that there was an existing connection when Tetbury had been granted to Aldhelm of Malmesbury by Æthelred of Mercia in 681.

At some point in his reign the Mercian King Offa , 757 – 796 (July), laid claim or seized the Malmesbury estates of Tetbury and Purton. Perhaps during the reign of the Wessex king, Cynewulf (757 – 786), when Offa defeated the West Saxons in battle and extended Mercian territory in the Thames valley. The settlement of the dispute concerning the Malmesbury estates may have reflected an agreement between their successors, Beorhtric (Mercia) and Ecgrith (Wessex), on the demarcation of the West Saxon/Mercian border. Purton, situated due east of Malmesbury was restored to the West Saxon monastery. Tetbury, originally the grant of a Mercian king and situated to the north of the monastery, was not given back, and was presumably retained by Worcester Abbey. This would be a logical arrangement if the border were near Malmesbury. A settlement of 796 suggests, however, that Mercia agreed to give up some part of the conquered land, either late in Offa's reign or after his death (S.E. Kelly)

*AD 796 Ecgrith, king of Mercia, to Cuthbert, abbot, and the brethren of Malmesbury Abbey; restitution of 35 hides (manentes) at Purton, Wilts., on the eastern side of the wood that is called Braydon, previously seized by King Offa, in return for 2000 silver solidi. (S149)*



Figure 1 – Map of the late 8<sup>th</sup> / early 9<sup>th</sup> c. Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy (uncredited)

Whilst we can now imply the geographic locality of the charter land, without an accompanying map we cannot be sure of the exact location and bounds of Purton at this point, or indeed Braydon [Forest] mentioned in AD 688. This was not unique then. The early charters would not have included vernacular bounds, these do not appear in West Saxon charters until early-mid ninth century and a later date for Mercian charters. Indeed, it is not until the early 13<sup>th</sup> c. do we see bounds for the English royal forests, of which Braydon was to become.

But we do have a set of fourteen boundary clauses relating to the early Malmesbury charters, dating to mid-late 14<sup>th</sup> century, however these are detached from any charters, and are unlikely to have existed as documents in their own right. The boundary clauses are in Latin, so must have been redacted (translated) into Latin from earlier Old English bounds. These, now lost, earlier Old English bounds would then have been drawn up later than the charters, but their purpose is unclear – perhaps to resolve disputes over Malmesbury's ownership of the land, to support oral testimony generated by regular 'beating of the bounds', and/or to

support later estate transfers. All things considered, there is a strong likelihood the Malmesbury boundary clause for Purton relates to the AD 796 charter.

These bounds take a similar form, from which we can deduce much useful information from. The first part of the bound describes the 'extent'; the manor/parish name and in not all cases, a measurement of area described in hides. The hide, from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'family / household', was, in the early medieval period, a land-holding that was considered sufficient to support a family. But with no fixed relationship to its area it is not entirely useful in calculating the extent in the way that an acre would be. The hide was the basis for the assessment of taxes and would vary somewhat by region, attempts have been made to estimate this in modern land measurement units.

The second part of the bound then outlines the boundary extent, as a series of marks described by topographical, geographical, man-made features and so on.

Here are the translated bounds of Purton (from which the title of this piece is taken) (S1586):

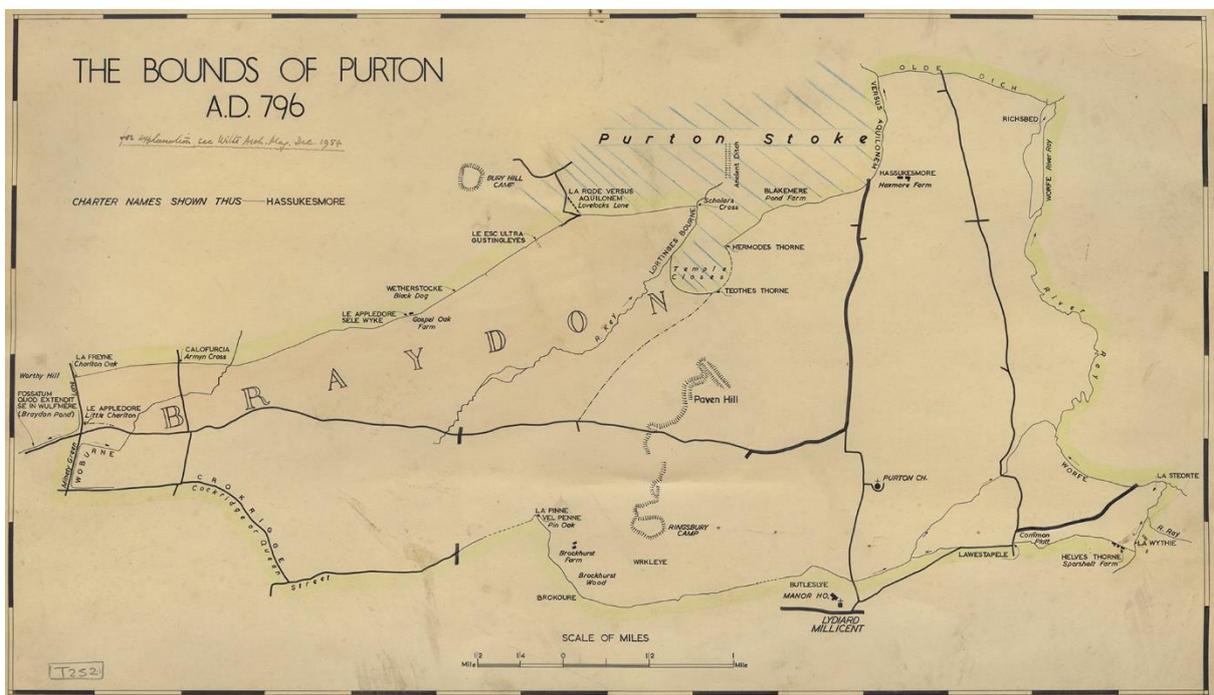
*In the vill of Purton are thirty-five hides of land and these are the boundaries of this land.  
First from the place which is called Lortingesburna [i.e., the river Key] to Teow's thorn-tree,  
and from that place to Heremod's thorn-tree.  
And from that to black pond,  
and from that place to the rough land with coarse grass.  
And from there northwards to the ditch which is called old ditch,  
and along that ditch straight to the rush-bed,  
and from there to the waterway called Worf.  
And thus straight along the stream to the spit of land,  
and from that place to the willow-tree,  
and from there to helnes [or 'helues'] thorn-tree.  
And from that place to lawe post,  
and from that to Bytel's [or 'beetle's'] wood  
and thus to weorc wood.  
And from there to the front part [Old English forthweard] of brook-ridge, that is, in the front,  
and from that place to the animal fold.  
And from that to Cockridge.  
And from that place to crooked stream,  
and from that to the ditch which runs to wolf pond,  
and from that place by the apple-tree to the ash-tree.  
And thus from that to the gallows,  
and from that place to the dairy farm of maple-tree hall.  
And from that to wether's tree-stump,  
and from that to the ash-tree beyond gustinge wood.  
And from gustinge wood to the road [or 'linear clearing'] northward,  
and from that road back to the starting-point, that is Lortingesburna.*

Now that we have our boundary marks, we then have the not insignificant task of locating them.

As these are redactions, a layer of text corruption may have occurred where the translator may have misunderstood places, where there were no direct Latin equivalent, re-phrasing, or simple spelling errors. And of course, being based on natural elements, many of these mark's have long since been lost with little evidence, if any, of their existence. We also have the challenge of translating these into modern language. This makes the whole process of tracing the boundaries more uncertain.



Figure 2 - Modern OS map showing the boundary mark locations (J. Wright 2020)



(TR Thompson 1954)

Figure 3 – Sketch map of “The Bounds of Purton AD 796”

Following a similar tracing principle for the later Braydon Forest boundary clauses, we can then overlay them all to create and verify the relationship between the extents described.

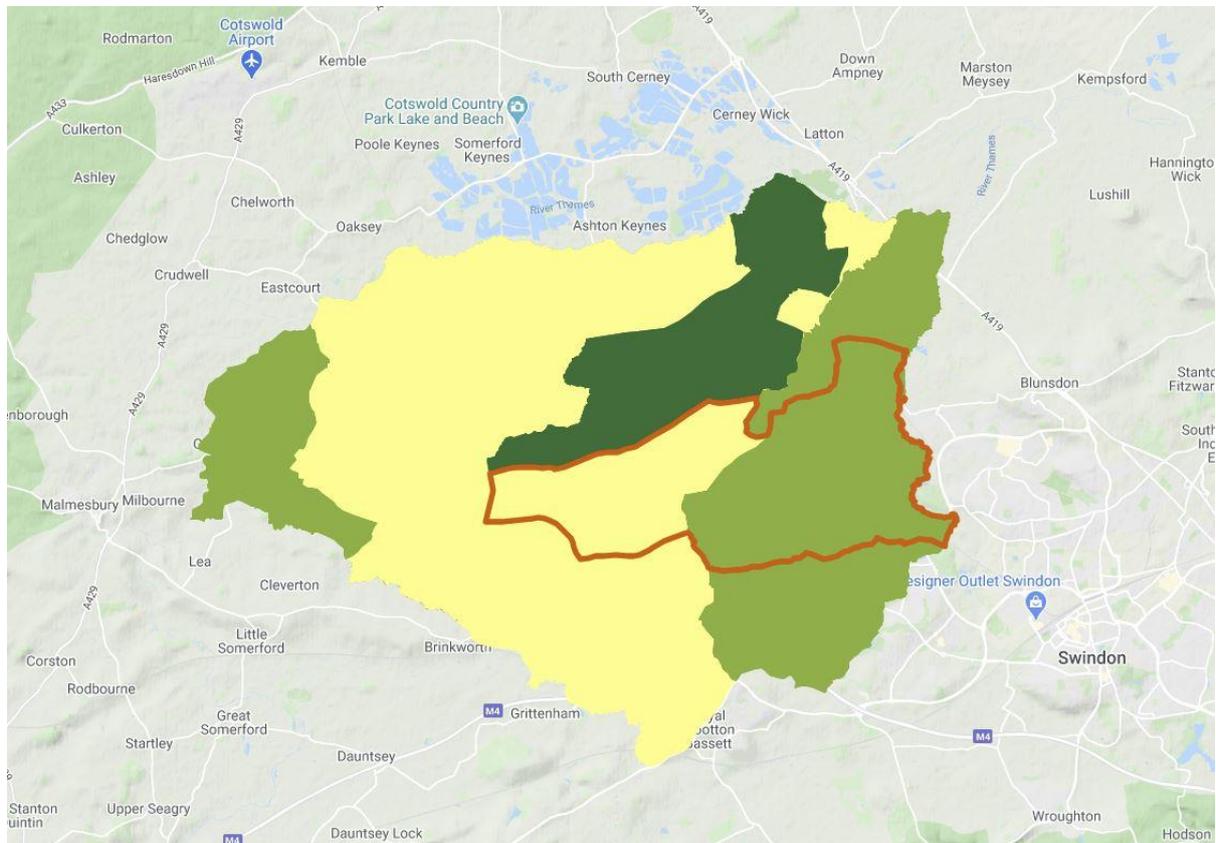


Figure 4 – The relationship between the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> c. Braydon Forest extents and Purton AD 796 (J Wright 2020)

Then, for the adventurous, like me, we can now ‘beat the bounds’ and walk these boundaries in act of metaphorical re-instatement of their existence in the landscape. A whole other story to be told ...