

# THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEMEN AND MANORS IN LATE ANGLO-SAXON SUFFOLK

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## INTRODUCTION

DOMESDAY BOOK RECORDS the great survey of the country ordered by William the Conqueror in 1085. It comprises two volumes, Little Domesday which covers Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex, and Great Domesday which covers the rest of England and parts of Wales. Little Domesday is in fact the larger and more detailed of the two volumes.<sup>1</sup> One exceptional feature of Suffolk at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, as recorded in Little Domesday, was the presence of large numbers of freemen, representing 41 per cent of the total population of the county.<sup>2</sup> Freemen, together with sokemen, constituted an element of society that was not bound to the immediate service of the local lords, so it may appear contradictory that Little Domesday also records in Suffolk some of the highest densities of manors in the country. With so many freemen operating largely outside the manorial system, why were there so many manors in Suffolk? Examining the interrelationship between these two elements, and its impact on the system of administration across Suffolk in the Anglo-Saxon period, may also

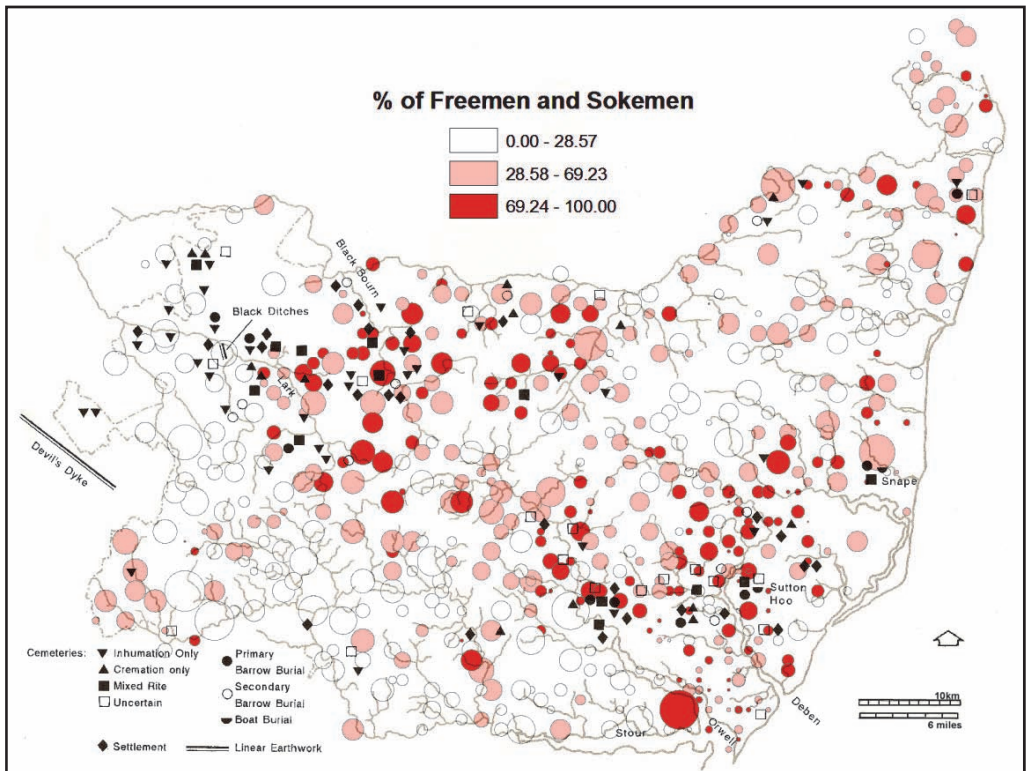


FIG. 24 – Freemen and sokemen compared with early Anglo-Saxon sites.

provide further insights into the development of settlement in the county. The study will focus on two new distribution maps, created from the information contained in Little Domesday through the use of computer databases and GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software, showing freemen and sokemen in the county (plotted against the distribution of early Anglo-Saxon sites shown in Fig. 24 and the number of manorial centres recorded in Little Domesday for each named vill shown in Fig. 25).<sup>3</sup>

The use of a GIS platform to accurately plot the information permitted greater quantities of data to be analysed across larger regional areas at a far greater magnitude of focus than had previously been possible or attempted, enabling more detailed comparisons to take place. To provide a greater context for the information analysed in the study, these figures are plotted against a base map showing the location and size of each Domesday vill. The size of each vill, or more precisely the size of the arable land recorded for each vill in Little Domesday, is accurately plotted by the size of each disc. The calculations for the size of arable land are based on an assumption that one carucate equals 120 statute acres.<sup>4</sup> To plot the vill, each area

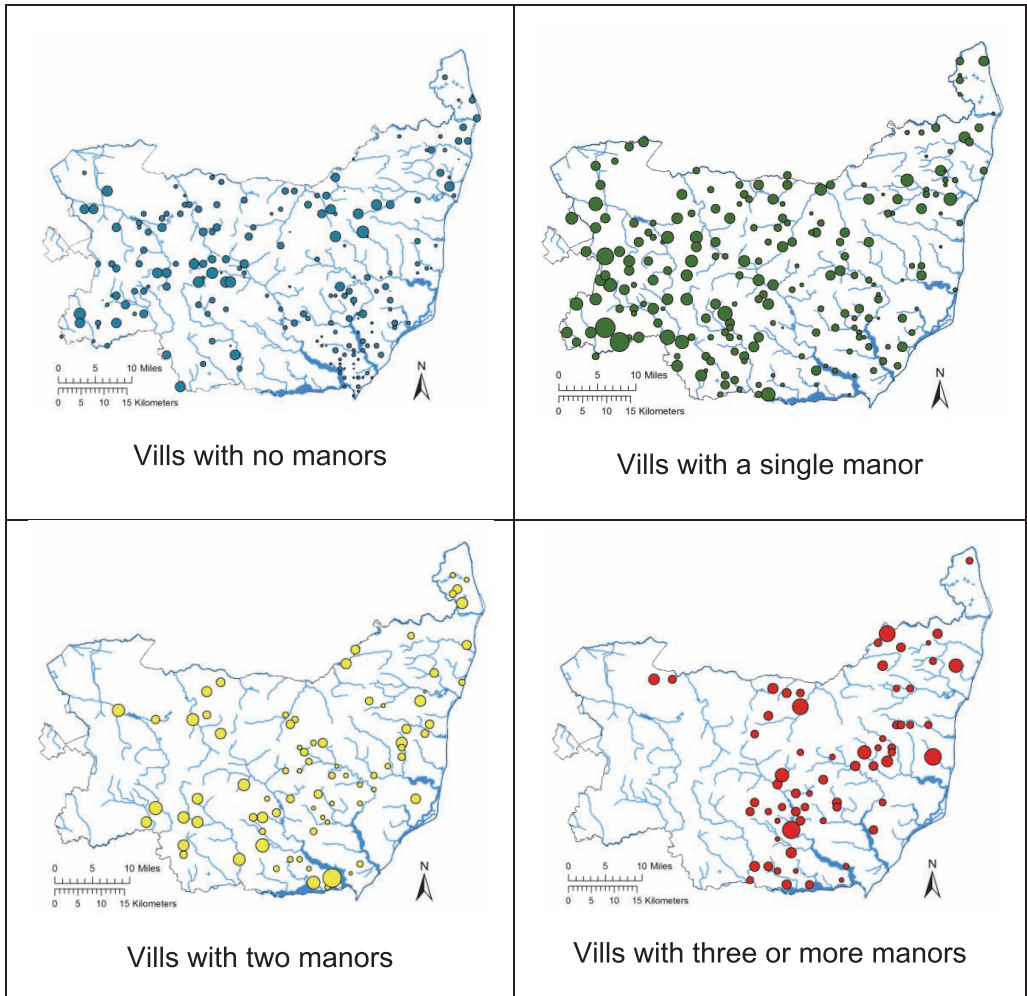


FIG. 25 – Distribution of manors across villages in Suffolk.

is converted into square metres and the radius of each disc calculated, using the formula  $\text{radius} = \sqrt{(\text{area}/\pi)}$ . Each disc is then plotted on GIS using a buffer tool, around a central grid reference. The central grid reference is taken from the four-figure references provided for each vill in the index of places in Volume 2 of the Phillimore translation of Little Domesday.<sup>5</sup>

The study will make a number of proposals: first that whilst the large numbers of freemen and sokemen recorded for the county in Little Domesday were generally small entrepreneurial farmers, they were not necessarily found in recently settled marginal areas of land, but had a far stronger presence in the heart of both the landscape and society.<sup>6</sup> These freemen and sokemen were occupying the prime valley sites that in other areas of the country were the location of the *capita* (manorial centres) of large and multiple estates. Second, that the remnants of earlier political units can be seen in the pattern of hundreds and letes across parts of the county at Domesday and are symptomatic of the continuation of an early system of extensive lordship in these areas.<sup>7</sup> Extensive lordship was a system of administrative and political control based on the social links and obligations of a community or folk group and a system of community land (known as *folkland*) to which those obligations were bound. This system predated the development of large and multiple estates.<sup>8</sup> One widespread form of extensive lordship known as the *scir*, will be discussed in more detail below.<sup>9</sup> Third, that in Suffolk the presence of a large free population, inhabiting a dense network of individual holdings, inhibited the evolution of these large and multiple estates in these parts of the county, and acted to suppress the development of a feudal system of control through land ownership. Fourth and finally it will be shown, through careful examination of the distribution of manors, how these units still fulfilled an important and vital role in the political and administrative systems of extensive lordship across the county.

#### FREEMEN AND SOKEMEN

Little Domesday records over 8000 named and unnamed freemen and sokemen in Suffolk, occupying holdings as small as the 5 perches of land held by a freeman in Boulge (Little Domesday: LDB fol. 443v), or the fourth part of an acre held by a freeman in Hoo (LDB fol. 317v), to holdings as large as the 100 acres held by Alwin a freeman in Hanchet (LDB fol. 396) or the 5 carucates of land held by Algeat at Barton Mills (LDB fol. 435v).<sup>10</sup> Freemen are also recorded as holding manors, and Athelgyth, a freewoman, held Shimpling as a manor of 6½ carucates (LDB fol. 415v). Manors were also occasionally recorded as being held by sokemen: a sokeman held 2 carucates of land and 10 acres as a manor in Denston (LDB fol. 390). What at first sight appears to be a definitive classification recorded by Little Domesday actually hides a plethora of sub-classes. From these few examples it is clear that the classification ranges from people whose landholding was little larger than that which would be expected for an unfree peasant such as a bordar or cottar, right through to housecarls, thegns and other members of the upper ranks of Anglo-Saxon society. To this extent the term ‘freeman’ represents the legal and fiscal status of that individual rather than their social class.

The complexity of these sub-classes is also in part recorded in Domesday through the associated rights, privileges and service obligations of these freemen and sokemen. These rights and obligations were a mixture of public duties, including those of the ancient *scir*, and individual private arrangements. For example, whether they were subject to a lord’s fold or held their own fold-soke; who held patronage and jurisdiction over them; whether they held life or lease interests; and the extent to which they were free to deal with their landholdings. These potential complexities in the Domesday record can be demonstrated in one entry in Little Domesday, fol. 421:

Auti [and] Ketil, free men and thegns, held Rushford TRE with 2 carucates of land ... These men held this land TRE as two manors ... In the same place 8 freemen with 1 carucate of land and 9 acres by commendation. Over 7 they have fold-soke and commendation over one only ... St Edmund has the soke over the whole Hundred.

Throughout Little Domesday careful distinction is made between freemen and sokemen, although even this distinction has never been satisfactorily explained. The current understanding is that the sokemen, inhabiting what is thought to be the remnants of the warland of older multiple estates that had been alienated by the king to a local lord, fell within the jurisdiction of that lord and his court. Multiple estates were structured around a system of land ownership and use. The whole estate was owned by the lord, while the land-use was split between *inland* and *warland*. Inland was inhabited and worked by the unfree peasantry, its sole purpose being to produce food for the local lord. Warland was other land in the estate inhabited by free peasants, who were able to use the land for their own needs and requirements, but still owed limited service obligations and duties to the local lord. A comparison of the entries recorded for Colneis hundred on the northern banks of the River Orwell with that of the Shotley peninsula on the southern banks demonstrates exactly how fine this distinction can be. A single entry for Earl Gyrth's 2½ carucate manor at Shotley (Little Domesday fols 287 and 287v) records 210 unnamed sokemen holding 2670 acres. This gives an average holding size of 12.7 acres for each sokeman,<sup>11</sup> whereas for Colneis hundred there are 38 separate entries covering 153 named freemen commended to Norman the Sheriff in 25 different named vills, holding a total of 1721 acres, at an average holding size of 11.2 acres for each freeman. Occupying similar areas of land, in reality, it must be doubted that there was much difference between the two groups of men, except that those on the Shotley peninsula occupied land that had previously been alienated by the king to a lord, in this instance to the earl of East Anglia, Gyrth, or a predecessor, and so were bound, not to the king but to the earl, and came under the jurisdiction of the manorial court rather than the hundred court. This also shows the difficulties in trying to place Domesday records in the landscape. Domesday simply does not provide detail on the size of the sokemen's individual holdings or their locations, whereas this information is recorded for the freemen, and it is proposed that the sokemen's holdings are likely to have been scattered over a similar area and variety of holdings as those of the freemen in Colneis, rather than in one large continuous common field, if the entry in Little Domesday is taken at face value. If sokemen did indeed occupy the warland of old multiple estates, then their limited distribution across the county shown in Fig. 26 suggests an equally limited distribution of multiple estates, such as Earl Gyrth's based in Shotley.

In contrast to these sokemen, the freemen of Suffolk held land freely and could bring suits in the hundredal court. Freemen owed services and dues directly to the king including *feorm* (a render of specified amounts of food which had to be provided each year) and other public services such as attendance at court, bridge building, fortification work and *fyrð* service (military service in the Anglo-Saxon fyrð army). In addition to these there were other light agricultural duties and obligations referred to in Little Domesday simply as service, such as that owed by 9 freemen to Bury Abbey's manor in Bradfield (LDB fol. 362). Domesday also records incidences where freemen listed in one vill had to perform these services in another, such as the 21 freemen in West Stow who did service in Lackford (LDB fol. 364), or the 10 freemen of Flempton who owed service in Risby, Lackford and Hengrave (LDB fol. 358). Roffe has suggested that these duties are indicative of these freemen's landholdings being part of a manor, even if they themselves were not considered manorial chattels.<sup>12</sup> Jolliffe, and more recently Faith, have more persuasively argued that many of these services were a continuance

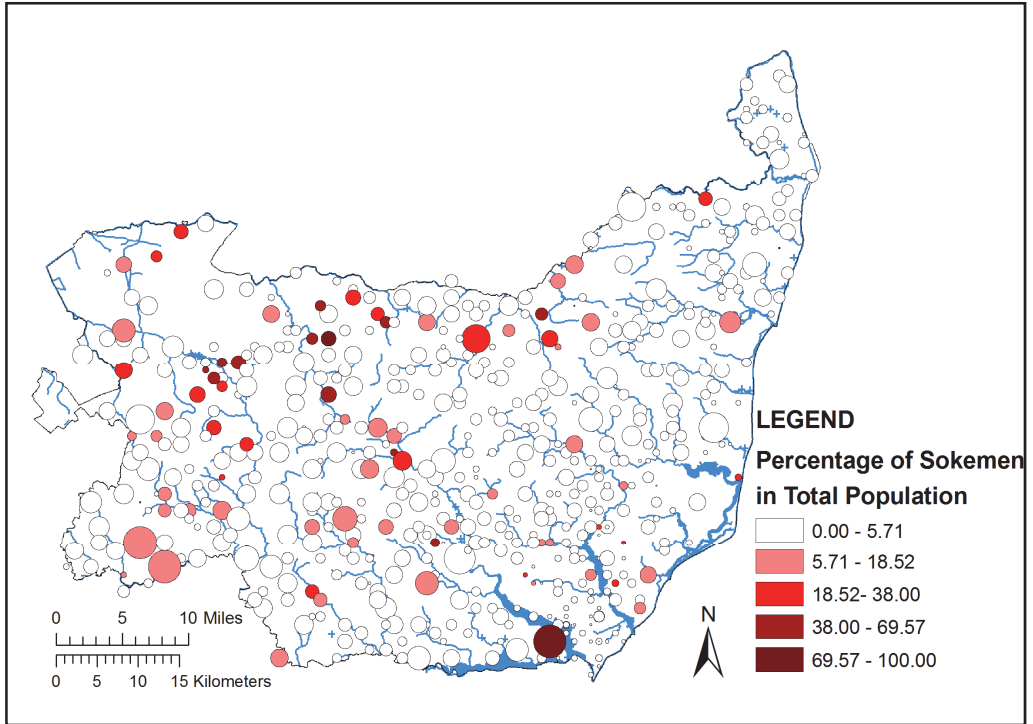


FIG. 26 – Distribution of sokemen as a percentage of the total population.

of the ancient *scir* obligations and customs that originated in the system of extensive lordship, and which could typically include the same type of agricultural boon works.<sup>13</sup> By Domesday, some of these services had been commuted to cash payments and are recorded as customary dues. These were payable to the same manorial centre as the original service was earlier due, so for the 21 freemen of West Stow referred to above, this meant that the customary dues had to be paid at Lackford (LDB fol. 364).

Another important aspect of the status of freemen was the right to migrate and to choose the lord to whom they were commended.<sup>14</sup> This could often lead to complex webs of commendation such as is recorded in Little Domesday folio 299v for Middleton.

In the same place 6 free men. Brunwine was wholly Munulf's man TRE; Ælfheah was half [Munulf's man] and Leofric half. Asmoth was wholly the woman of Toli the sheriff and Beorhtmær her son was the man of Beorhtmær the reeve of Robert Malet with a sixth part of the land. Cyneric was the man of Eadric, son of Ingeld and Grim was his man also.

It was the independent legal personality, the right and obligation to attend court and, importantly, the duty to pay the geld due on their lands that most clearly defined freemen and sokemen, forming the basis of their status and linking that status to the land. Faith, highlighting the close associations of these freemen holdings with both the king and with the public services and dues described above, concluded that they might have developed out of the ancient folklands and *scirs*. The small administrative *scir* referred to was a form of social organisation based on public obligations and custom.<sup>15</sup> These social units were controlled by the dominant families, who held political and military power of the type described by Bassett.

*Scirs* were centred on important settlements where these dominant families received and gave tribute, and settled disputes.<sup>16</sup> These centres were often located in riverine positions near important transport routes and river crossings. Importantly, they served a social group which identified itself with the centre; a *scir* did not necessarily have any physical boundaries, nor did it have to be physically integrated, although it often naturally reflected the river valley systems on which the agrarian economy of the group was structured.<sup>17</sup> It is important to remember that the *scir* was essentially a political unit, whereas the later multiple estate which came to replace it was a unit of land ownership and food production. In large parts of Suffolk the development of large multiple estates only really occurred in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, as the rule and control of people slowly became an integral part of land ownership. The timing of this development is much later than in other parts of the country. As a result a system developed in the county whereby the public rights and obligations became linked to the land rather than the owner. It is for this reason that public acknowledgment of the payment of the *geld* was so important to freemen and sokemen. There was a real danger that they could lose their status, and lose their land if they did not pay. There are examples from Domesday where lords have obtained ownership of land by paying the *geld*. The collection of the *geld* and local administration of the freemen was largely self-regulated, with the freemen grouped into tithings, the members of which were bound by frankpledge and were collectively responsible for the payment of the *geld* and the good behaviour of individual members.<sup>18</sup> Whilst a freeman could act independently of his lord and was free to alienate his land, the interests of his family had still to be taken into account. This link with the family is equally apparent from the customs of partible inheritance that could attach to such land.<sup>19</sup> It is a combination of this freedom to alienate and partible inheritance, together with an active land market, that is believed, in part, to be responsible for the dense networks of smallholdings held by the freemen and sokemen in Domesday Suffolk. What cannot be ascertained from the snapshot of the landscape and society provided by Little Domesday is the longevity of many of the smallest holdings of only a few acres or less. It can be argued that these units were too small to support an independent household, and so must represent freemen on the very brink of servitude. Such a view is reliant on the freemen in question depending solely on agricultural produce from those holdings as their only source of food and income. These could equally be the holdings of semi-skilled craftsmen free to conduct non-agrarian commercial activities through which they were able to support and sustain themselves and their families, thus making the agricultural produce from smallholdings less crucial and the smallholdings themselves a far more permanent feature of the landscape.

It is clear from Domesday that in Suffolk many held land jointly, and it would be an error to consider all freemen and sokemen as independent owners of individual plots of land. Whilst some of the Domesday entries recording land held jointly inevitably reflect tithe groups, others, where there are only two or three freemen holding small plots of land, may well indicate situations where the holding had to be shared to reflect the interests of the different freemen.

The proportion of freemen and sokemen in the total population is greatest in the main central river valleys – in particular the Deben and Gipping towards the east of the county; and the Waveney, Dove, Little Ouse, Blackbourne and Lark in the north and west. Fig. 24 shows the combined distribution densities for freemen and sokemen compared to known early Anglo-Saxon sites. There appears to be a very high coincidence between the presence of freemen and sokemen in Domesday Suffolk and these early Anglo-Saxon sites. As with all archaeological evidence of this type, caution must be used, as the map naturally will not record any unknown sites. Equally, the majority of these early sites are cemeteries as opposed to actual settlements, which could have moved some distance away with people only returning to these sites to bury their dead. Whilst there may be similarities in the geographic distribution

of Domesday freemen and the early settlement of East Anglia, it must be remembered that the two are separated by over 500 years of history. It would be dangerous to infer that the Domesday freemen and sokemen are the direct descendants of these early settlers or assert some racial determination behind the class structure at Domesday. It is in these long settled valley sites that historians would normally expect to locate the establishment of large multiple estates, with areas of inland dedicated to the production of food for the lord, and populated by large numbers of bond peasants – typically slaves, bordars and villeins.<sup>20</sup> Freemen and sokemen are usually only seen outside these central locations on areas of warland, where they occupy the land in small individual farms, often rented from the local lord. Tom Williamson, from his examination of the freemen and sokemen in Norfolk, proposed that the freemen were pioneering entrepreneurial farmers, assarting land in the more sparsely populated areas away from the main river valleys, on the poorer soils of the flat clay interfluves and coastal marshlands, on land that had only previously been used as part of the seasonal transhumance of livestock.<sup>21</sup> For Suffolk, Little Domesday only records a pattern of large estates with higher numbers of slaves and villeins in the south and west of the county. So why are so many freemen and sokemen recorded in these main river valley locations? Was the later disintegration of these large estates more complete in these locations, caused by either a late surge in the number of immigrants into the area (i.e. fission from below) or were the estates deliberately split up and gifted to a greater number of supporters by a king or ealdorman who controlled these particular river valleys (fission from above)?<sup>22</sup> Both of these proposals presuppose that these large and multiple estates were in fact created in the first place, whereas the greater densities of free population living on small independent landholdings in the river valleys of northern and eastern Suffolk in particular probably acted to inhibit the development of such estates, thus enabling the earlier political *scir* system of extensive lordship based on public service and customs to remain predominant until much later in the Anglo-Saxon period.

This system of extensive lordship may have been perpetuated and supported by Ely Abbey and the king, acting as absentee lords over the Liberty of St Etheldreda (or Wicklaw) and the Geldable, more interested in collecting customary dues, rents and taxes from a dense network of freemen smallholdings, rather than creating large areas of demesne land dedicated to directly providing food renders. This can be contrasted to the west of the county, in the Liberty of St Edmund, where the abbey took a more active role in controlling its land and creating a network of demesne estates to provide food supplies direct to the abbey for the monastic population. Large numbers of freemen and sokemen are still recorded in Domesday for parts of the west of the county, particularly for Thedwastre and Blackbourne hundreds, but their presence is in part hidden by the method of recording (under a single entry for each tithing group rather than individually as in Wicklaw and the Geldable), and in part by changes consequent on the creation of the Liberty in the early eleventh century.

Before we examine the impact of the creation of the Liberty, we must examine one important area where the relationship between early settlement and the presence of freemen and sokemen does not appear to apply. That is in Breckland (in the north-west of the county) particularly in Lackford hundred, where, despite an abundance of early Anglo-Saxon sites, there are very low densities of freemen and sokemen. Out of a total recorded population of 486 for Lackford hundred there are only 59 freemen and sokemen. There are a number of possible reasons for the apparent breakdown of this relationship. Breckland covers an area of very marginal land; the sandy soils are prone to drought, leaching and wind erosion. These poor soil conditions are accompanied by a very limited water supply. The early settlers may have found it increasingly difficult to continue cultivating the same area of land as a result of this combination of factors, prompting an early move further up the river valleys onto the

richer heavier clay soils which do not suffer these problems. The marginal condition of the soil and limited water supplies is also evidenced at Domesday by the very low density of the total population in this area. Whether this movement of population occurred quickly as a result of one disastrous event in which a whole year's or more crop was lost, forcing the abrupt abandonment of settlement, or more slowly over a longer period of years is not known, although it appears that the whole of the Lark Valley and all but the very upper reaches of the Blackbourne Valley were colonised at a very early stage.

For those that did remain on the poor Breckland soils, the frequency of crop failures is likely to have forced them into debt and below the poverty line, at which point it may have been more advantageous for them to give up their freedoms for the greater security provided to the slaves, bordars and villiens. As such they would not have to rely solely on the produce from their own land, but would become part of a larger estate with more resources both inside and outside the immediate area. This would have acted as a kind of insurance in times of crop failure. Equally, lands could have been taken from them if, with the owner unable to pay the geld, it was paid by someone else, or land was simply deserted when, unable to support themselves, the early inhabitants moved further up the valleys in search of more reliable land. Another indicator of this process, given in Domesday, is the greater numbers of sokemen recorded in this area. As has been discussed, the presence of sokemen in the area surrounding Icklingham on the edge of the Brecks may be indicative of an old multiple estate centre, as would be expected in this area if the process described above were correct.

Questions may be raised as to why a similar pattern does not occur on the Sandlings, a narrow coastal strip of similar sandy Newport Association soils that extend from the Orwell estuary northwards up the coast. Importantly this area does not suffer to quite the same extent as the Brecks from a limited water supply, enabling a more sustainable and dispersed colonisation of the land by a larger population.<sup>23</sup> These sandy soils are also restricted to a coastal strip between the river estuaries rather than the middle reaches of the river valleys as in the west. In part, it appears that the area was also simply bypassed by the early immigrants, who continued up the river valleys to settle on the richer clay soils that lay inland from the coast. The relative scarcity of early Anglo-Saxon archaeological sites on the Sandlings can be seen in the distribution pattern in Fig. 24.

In the heavily settled areas, the land became linked with public obligations, customs and payments, and evolved into the *terra* holdings held directly from the king, recorded in Domesday. As has been discussed, whilst large regional political units were inevitably formed, the sheer density of individual smallholdings appears to have suppressed the later creation and dominance of the large multiple estates that are seen in other parts of the country. As such, it is probably more appropriate to think of these areas of dense freemen populations as areas of *folkland* rather than the inland and warland that are associated with large seigneurial estates found elsewhere in England. The density of the population, and the tying of public duties to small plots of land, meant that the assemblage of large areas of inland was both very difficult, and potentially very onerous with the public service obligations that would have been accumulated.

The creation of large estates was not completely stifled: there are still examples of sizeable estates having been established by the likes of Aelfric and his son Wihtgar in south-west Suffolk (as discussed by Faith). We also have Edric of Laxfield's estate based in Eye in north-east Suffolk, and Harold's based in East Bergholt in the south-east of the county.<sup>24</sup> The presence of these large estates, though, did not come to dominate the landscape and vills in the densely settled parts of Suffolk as they did elsewhere in the country, and where they are found it is suggested that they are relatively late creations.



## ADMINISTRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

The old *scir* system was eventually broken up and superseded by the establishment of the system of hundreds and letes across East Anglia. The imposition of this administrative structure cannot be accurately dated, but is believed to have been imposed at the start of the tenth century in the aftermath of the reconquest of East Anglia by Edward the Elder.<sup>25</sup> As such, the imposition of the hundreds could be seen as the introduction of West Saxon political control over East Anglia. However, doubts about the strength of that control and the nature of the reconquest have been raised by Lucy Marten, the process now thought to be completed only in the 1030s by King Canute.<sup>26</sup> If the strength of West Saxon control in Suffolk was weaker than elsewhere in the country, it could be expected that the imposition of the 'new' administrative structure of hundreds was also weaker, and more closely resembled the existing pattern of *scirs*. Peter Warner has identified the large hundred of Blything, its boundary largely following the watershed for the River Blythe, with one early Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and possibly an earlier Roman administrative unit, and proposes that the five and a half hundreds of Wicklaw formed another early unit.<sup>27</sup> It has similarly been suggested that the eight and a half hundreds of the Liberty of St Edmund represent another ancient *scir*.<sup>28</sup>

A further indicator of the possible weakness of West Saxon administrative control in East Anglia as a whole in the period following the reconquest is the two systems of geld assessment that are recorded in Little Domesday. Unlike the rest of the country, which was assessed on the number of hides in each vill, in East Anglia there are two systems, one based on the carucate and acre figures recorded for each vill, and a second system based on the vill paying a given number of pennies when the hundred pays a pound. In the 'pennies in the pound' system the geld liability for the county was broken, down first by hundred, then by lete, and finally by vill. The length and width of each vill is recorded in Little Domesday with the amount of the geld liability. James Campbell has asserted that the carucate and acre figures represent an older system, as they bear no clear relationship to the amounts of geld recorded in Domesday.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, David Roffe has argued, using evidence from elsewhere in the country, that the recording of carucates was an early stage towards the conversion of land to the system of hidation.<sup>30</sup> If this is correct, then in East Anglia, with the late date for the creation of Suffolk and Norfolk proposed by Lucy Marten, it would appear that the 'pennies in the pound' scheme may be the older system, linked to the structure of *scirs* and through that to the subsequent structure of letes and hundreds. The carucate assessments, being a much later development, may represent a final stage in bringing East Anglia more closely into line with the rest of the country.

Whilst parts of the hundredal pattern in Suffolk may reflect earlier political and administrative units, it would be wrong to assume that the geld had not been subject to change and amendment during the course of the tenth and early eleventh centuries. There are examples across East Anglia of geld assessments and lete responsibility being altered in response to changing circumstances to ensure that a fiscal balance was retained.<sup>31</sup> This variation in the lete structures and assessments suggests that administrative decisions may have been taken at the level of the hundred, rather than at that of the shire.<sup>32</sup> Equally, with Suffolk's unique administrative pattern of the two Liberties and the Geldable it is likely that some control was also exercised at Liberty level.

The abbeys at Bury and Ely held their Liberties as viceroys of the king, and as such were able to reorganise and enhance their franchises to serve and provide for their needs.<sup>33</sup> The role of Ely Abbey, acting as an absentee landlord with a greater desire to maximise its income from customary dues and rents, than for the provision of food supplies from demesne agriculture, may have contributed to the distinctive administrative structure of Wicklaw. Warner, drawing

on the similarities between the pattern of hundreds in Wicklaw and the pattern of letes across the rest of the county, ascribed the dislocated pattern of hundreds in Wicklaw to Ely Abbey ‘upgrading’ the letes of the former *scir* to hundredal status to increase the tax income from their franchise. James Campbell, more compellingly, suggests that hundredal size is related to population size, which itself is an indicator of taxable capacity. The pattern of letes across the whole county (and the hundredal pattern in Wicklaw if they are upgraded letes) reflected a structure that was imposed to insure fiscal balance between the letes. There are three further important points to note, first that this dislocated hundredal pattern also applies to Claydon hundred which falls outside Wicklaw and forms part of the Geldable, and secondly the fact that Ely Abbey (unlike Bury Abbey) did not receive part of the geld payment, so would not have a vested interest in any increased geld or tax revenue from an upgrading of these letes to hundreds. It is therefore far more likely that this structure was imposed by the king, rather than by the abbey. Thirdly, when Wicklaw was regranted to the abbey in 970, it was described at that time as the five and a half hundreds, suggesting that the upgrading process had already been completed. This early reference may be to an older smaller form of hundred, similar to the early twelve carucate hundreds of Lincolnshire and other parts of the Danelaw or the ten hide hundreds of Cambridgeshire, particularly bearing in mind that the earliest references to letes are in Little Domesday itself.<sup>34</sup> Rather than being ‘upgraded’ to hundredal status, these small hundreds of Wicklaw and Claydon simply maintained that status due to their high population densities, when other small hundreds in the county were ‘downgraded’ or rather redesignated as letes to form parts of the larger hundreds recorded in Little Domesday.

Having only been granted the Liberty over West Suffolk in 1043 or 1044, it is clear from Little Domesday that Bury Abbey was instituting a process of administrative reform and

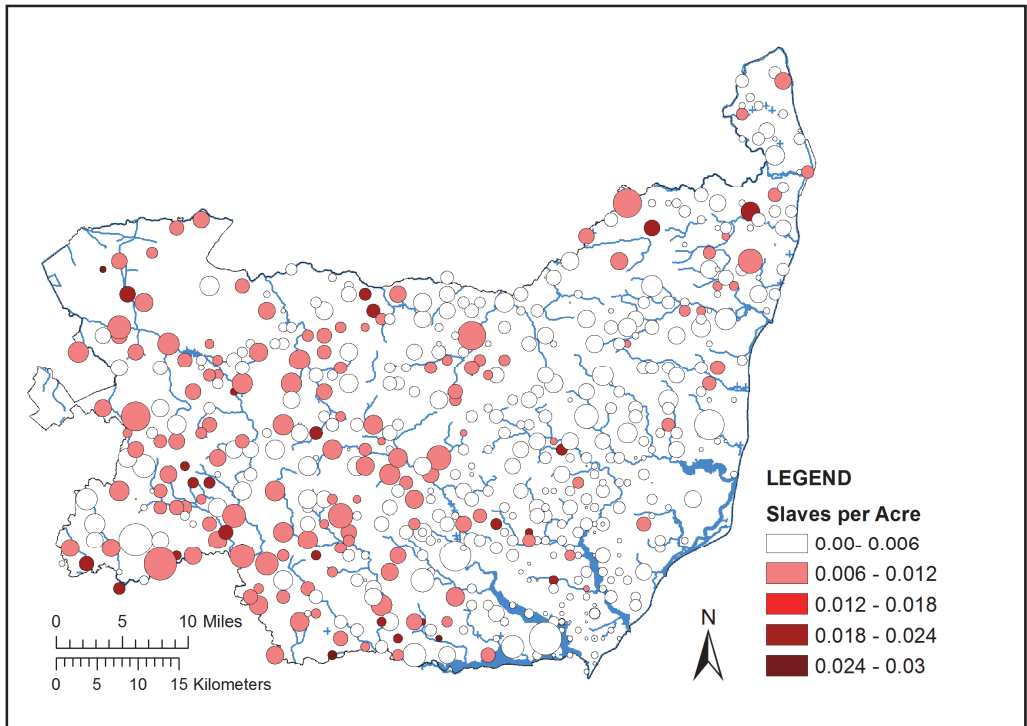


FIG. 27 – Distribution of slaves by density.

organisational restructuring. The Domesday entry for Bury St Edmunds (LDB fol. 372) reveals a complete transformation of the town between 1066 and 1085. It is suggested that these reforms extended well beyond its boundaries into the surrounding countryside of the Liberty, where a much wider manifesto of reforms was being implemented. Importantly, and unlike the Geldable and Wicklaw, the Liberty of St Edmund had to fulfil the dual purpose of providing food and support to the abbey and an income to fund the abbot's ambitious building plans.<sup>35</sup> The organisation of food supplies can be seen in the network of estates across the whole Liberty. A survey of the abbey's lands from 1045 to 1065 contains details of how, under Abbot Leofstan, it organised its manors in the Liberty into twelve groups, each responsible for providing one month's food.<sup>36</sup> This organisation is also reflected in the distribution of slaves across the county at Domesday shown in Fig. 27. It is clear that the estates and manors across the Liberty were stocked with comparatively high numbers of bond peasants, to create a widespread network of demesne estates. There is also some evidence of the abbey concentrating its landholdings within the Liberty, where it held administrative power. Lucy Marten has highlighted the case of the Rickinghall estate, donated to the abbey in 1005 by Ulfcytel, which by Domesday was split in two, divided by the Liberty boundary and recorded against two different hundreds. The abbey, having lost, sold, swapped or granted away the area that fell outside the Liberty, retained the area that remained within its franchise, although it is unclear whether this occurred before or after the new Liberty boundary was imposed.<sup>37</sup> This example also serves as another reminder that these administrative boundaries were not all ancient units and, particularly in the west of the county, they appear to have been subject to change and reform at some point in the late tenth or early eleventh century. Together with the highly regularised system of hundreds and tithes examined by Hart, Welldon Finn and Campbell, they are likely to reflect this same process of reform being imposed by the abbey across the wider landscape of the Liberty at this time.<sup>38</sup> This process of regularisation can also be seen in the distribution of manors across the county.

## MANORS

It is not possible to map each Domesday manor separately; however the numbers of manors recorded in each vill are shown in Fig. 25. These are purely those holdings described as being held as a manor (*pro manerio*) and so should represent the *capita* as distinct from holdings of demesne land (*in dominio*). All land held as a manor was also demesne land, in that it had demesne ploughs operating on it, but references to demesne land may not necessarily include the manorial centre and could include the outlying parts of a manor that fell within a neighbouring vill. Over much of the country (recorded in Great Domesday) there is a classic relationship of one manor per vill, however in Suffolk, as in other parts of the Danelaw, the relationship between vill and manor breaks down, there being vill without a manor and equally vill with several manors.

Surely it can be no coincidence that the number of vill with three or more manors abruptly stops at the boundary of the Liberty of St Edmund (Fig. 28), there being only two vill in west Suffolk (Elveden and Barnham) with three manors. The abbey's administrative reorganisation appears to have included the rationalisation of the number of manors and vill across the Liberty so that there are no more than two manors in any one vill.

This process can be compared with that taking place in the east of the county, in Wicklaw and the Geldable. Here there seems to have been a greater rationalisation when the structure of vill was imposed as part of the infrastructure for the collection of the geld. This rationalisation was made possible by the density of the existing population and the high

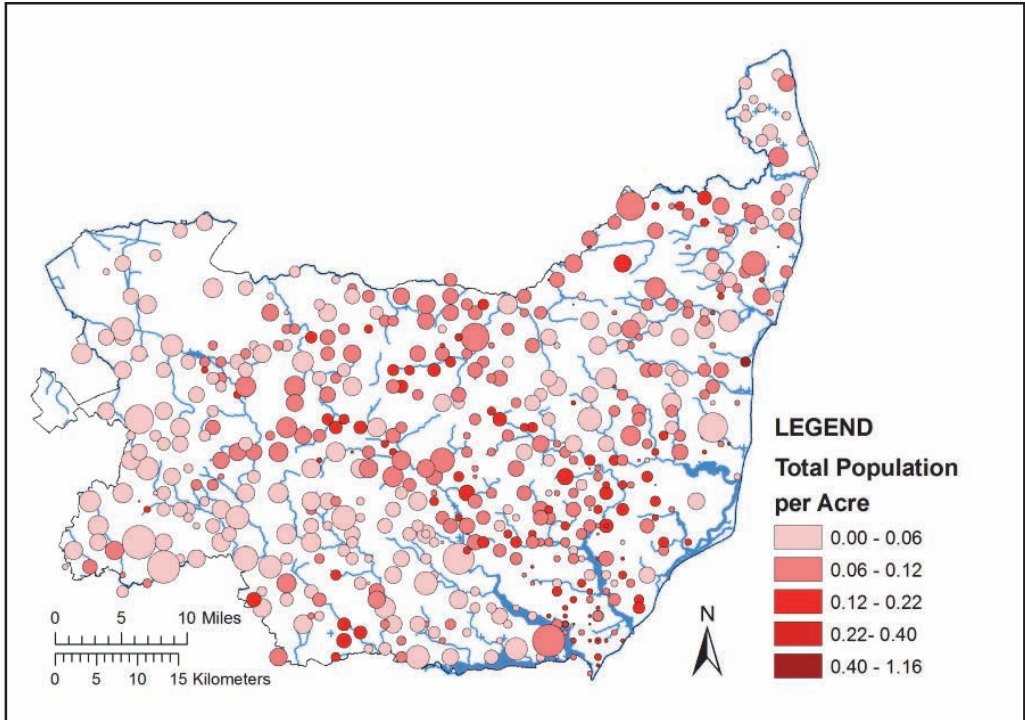


FIG. 28 – Total population per acre.

numbers of separate holdings and manors within this area. It appears that the existing structure of holdings and manors was simply overlain by a planned network of larger villis, whilst utilising some of the existing manors as the collection points.

The fact that the administrative reforms of Bury Abbey could have affected the distribution of manors in the west of the county, whilst those manors in the east of the county that were not selected as geld collection points were able to retain their manorial status, raises questions over the administrative and public, rather than seigneurial, role of these manors during the late Anglo-Saxon period. This varied distribution of manors has recently led David Roffe to question the link between the manor and the geld first proposed by Maitland, and instead to suggest that manors were much older institutions, originating as centres for the receiving and giving of tribute in the early political and administrative structures, and the collection of rents, customary dues and services.<sup>39</sup> This connection also explains the relationship between freemen holdings and manors. Freemen held land direct from, and owed services directly to, the king. Manors, as tribute centres, were the control point governed by the local lord who had been interposed between the king and the peasantry. Campbell has highlighted important connections between the lete and the later manorial court leet, again emphasising the extent to which these manorial courts had a public element originating in the concept of a local community as an institutionalised entity.<sup>40</sup> Drawing these characteristics together, in these folkland areas of Suffolk, manors originated as, or quickly became, the focal point for the performance of public services – such as fortification works and *fyrð* that were administered and enforced through the court leet. The term used in Little Domesday, *manerium* has been interpreted as a manor, and it is this term that has been used in this paper, however this should not be taken as being the same institution as the feudal manor that developed in the post

Conquest period. The term means house and it is possibly recording the Anglo-Saxon burhs, identified by Edward Martin as a type of site within a palisade and ditched enclosure, with a hall, barns and often a church, such as at Brockley, Wattisham, Sutton and Wingfield.<sup>41</sup> The ditch and palisade enclosure of these sites may have been built and maintained by those freemen performing their public service. In the late Anglo-Saxon period as many of these public services were commuted to payments of customary dues, so it is possible that these sites evolved to become centres for the collection of these dues and eventually, for some, the collection of the geld. As such they are probably older institutions than those of the vill and were fiscal units employed for the payment of the geld. The introduction of the vill infrastructure in east Suffolk appears to have rationalised the existing network of manors, with only certain manors responsible for the collection of the geld for the vill. If this is correct, then, importantly, manors were originally part of the earlier administrative landscape of tribute and service that bound the population, predating the later feudal system based on land ownership, and as such the pattern of manors should be closely aligned with the general distribution of population, rather than the system of vills.

Whilst not completely ignoring the possible distorting impact of the reforms in west Suffolk, the density of manors does appear to reflect that of the population (Fig. 28) and landholdings (Fig. 29) across the county. Vills without a manor are clustered in two main locations: in the area around the Deben and Orwell estuaries and secondly (and more generally) in the very upper reaches of the river valleys. The classic vills with one manor are evenly distributed throughout the county and river valleys compared to those with more than one manor that show a more distinctive pattern. The vills with two manors show a slightly higher concentration to the east of the central clay plateau, generally occupying the middle reaches of

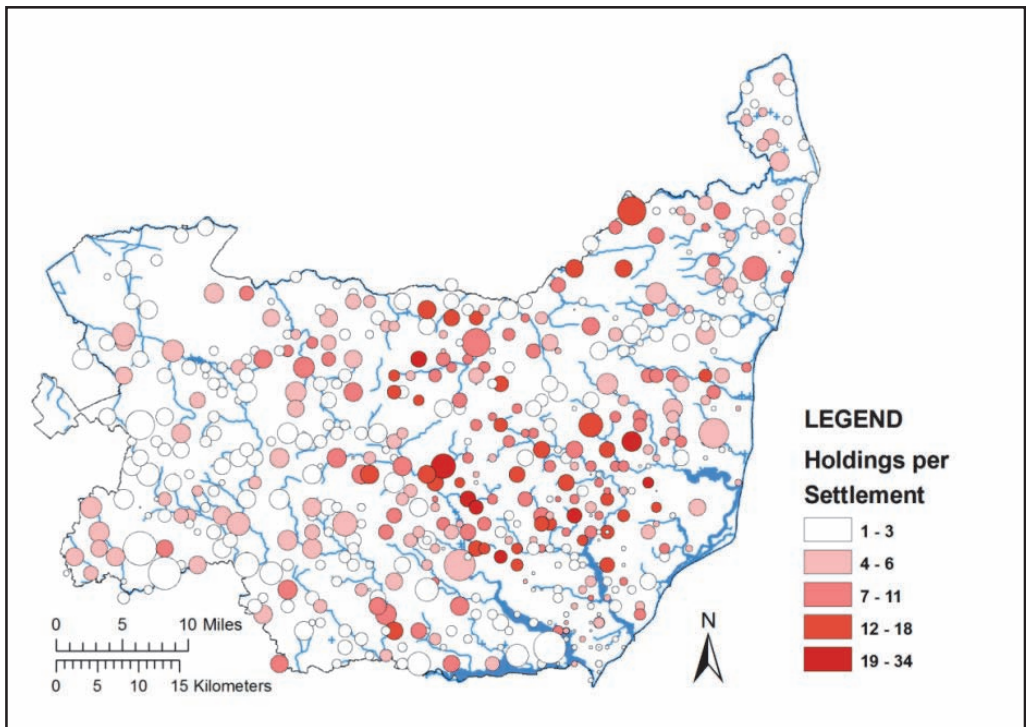


FIG. 29 – Number of holdings per vill.

the river valleys and the upper reaches of the Deben Valley, while those with three or more manors again all occupy the middle reaches of river valleys, albeit in the east of the county only.

As administrative centres created by and serving the population, so the numbers of manors naturally reflect the changes in the densities of population and individual holdings and the growth of settlement across the county. The areas surrounding the favourable riverine locations that were first settled, and which by Domesday had greater concentrations of population and holdings, also have greater numbers of manors. In the very upper reaches and on the interfluves there is a mixture of relatively large single-manor vills and small non-manorial pioneer settlements. This pattern, allied with the marginal nature of the heavy clay soils and a lack of archaeological evidence for early settlement, suggests these areas were settled relatively late as seasonally-used land slowly became permanently settled.

The picture appears more complicated in the lower reaches of the Deben and Gipping valleys in Colneis hundred where, despite Domesday recording high densities of freemen, there are very few manors. Importantly, though, the overall size and number of separate holdings within each named Domesday vill declines dramatically in this area, suggesting that the vast majority of the settlements in this area did not reach the critical mass necessary to support the creation of a manor. One reason for this may be the combination of environmental factors present, in the form of the poor sandy Newport soils and limited water supplies discussed earlier, together with the presence of the Saxon Shore fort at Walton and the effect this may have had on this coastal area. As discussed, Little Domesday records 151 freemen in Colneis hundred commended to Norman the Sheriff, based at his manor on the fort site at Walton. This may imply that for these settlements the performance of public fortification works and *fyrð* services was concentrated mainly on this one site. This picture is reflected across the Orwell on the Shotley Peninsula, where 210 sokemen were attached to Earl Gyrrh's manor at Shotley. Again, the main focal point for the performance of the public services of these sokemen would have been the manorial *caput* in Shotley. However, with richer loam soils the Shotley Peninsula was able to support larger settlements, with the larger populations in turn enabling, or indeed requiring, the creation of other manorial centres.

## CONCLUSION

The folios of Little Domesday not only provide a snapshot of late Anglo-Saxon England, but also reveal the remnants of an earlier system of extensive lordship in Suffolk. This was a system founded on a free population occupying folkland. The folkland itself carried the common burdens of public service, military obligation and a liability to pay customary dues and taxes. Within this system the manor, as a focal point for the performance and enforcement of these public services and for the payment of these taxes and customary dues, formed an integral part of the administrative infrastructure. It is this interrelationship between freemen and manors that was pivotal in the organisation of these early systems of extensive lordship. The density of manors in these central valley areas in parts of Suffolk simply reflects the high density of both the free population and the number of individual land holdings during this period. It is this dense network of small freemen holdings and their attendant services and customary dues that appears to have suppressed the creation of large and multiple estates seen elsewhere in the county, and inhibited the development of an administrative infrastructure based on land ownership. The weaker nature of the English reconquest in East Anglia, the consequent delay in the introduction of the full shrieval system of administration, and the continued influence of Bury and Ely Abbeys through the two Liberties, also acted to further preserve the earlier system of *scirs* within the administrative infrastructure of manors, letes and hundreds of Domesday. In light of this, a more detailed and systematic re-evaluation of

that administrative infrastructure is now needed. Further research is also needed into the importance of the public, as opposed to seigniorial, nature of these early manors in Suffolk, and how that public purpose may have influenced the subsequent development of these manors within the wider feudal system that came to dominate the medieval landscape and society of Suffolk, and with which manors have since become synonymous.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Domesday Book also records information for two dates: TRW (Tempore Regis Willelmi, 'in the time of King William') being the date of the survey in 1085 and the earlier TRE (Tempore Regis Edwardi, 'in the time of King Edward') being the date of Edward the Confessor's death in 1066, at the very end of the Anglo-Saxon period.
- 2 Darby 1971, 168.
- 3 The distribution of Early Anglo Saxon Sites is taken from Dymond and Martin 1999, 45.
- 4 Whilst the relationship between carucates and hides and any physical size is still very contentious, there is a growing consensus that in Suffolk, at least they do represent 120 statute acres: Hart 1992, 75; Welldon Finn 1967, 109–12; Hesse 2000, 21–36.
- 5 Rumble 1986. It is recognised that there are 92 villas recorded in Little Domesday for which the location is unknown.
- 6 Williamson 1993, 119–22.
- 7 A lete was an intermediate administrative and fiscal unit, between the level of the hundred and the vill and could consist of one or more villas. The pattern of letes across the Suffolk has been reconstructed using later documents but is believed originally to have been associated with the geld payments of the late Anglo-Saxon Period, with the geld liability being divided by county, hundred, lete, vill and then individual holdings.
- 8 Faith 1997, 1–14.
- 9 This term is the same as the modern shire, however the old English spelling is used to distinguish this older and smaller administrative unit from the larger modern incarnation.
- 10 Hanchet is believed to be Hanchet Hall in Withersfield.
- 11 This average holding size is very close to the 12.5 acre manlot – a measurement of land that originates from Scandinavia and represented the area of land allotted to a member of the Danish Army.
- 12 Williamson 1993, 94; Roffe 2007, 151, 221.
- 13 Faith 1997, 113.
- 14 Faith 1997, 90–97; Roffe 2007, 220–23.
- 15 Faith 1997, 1–14.
- 16 Bassett 1989, 3–27.
- 17 Faith 1997, 9.
- 18 Faith 1997, 118–19; Roffe 2007, 196.
- 19 Roffe 2007, 154–55.
- 20 Jones 1979, 11–40.
- 21 Williamson 1993, 119–21.
- 22 Williamson 1993, 121–22.
- 23 See the distribution map of ponds in Rackham 1986, 347. Evidence from parish boundaries in these two areas also shows that with a greater abundance of rivers and ponds there was less need to share water sources between different settlements in the Sandlings than in the Brecks, where, for example, there is a very distinctive pattern of boundaries showing how eleven different settlements shared the important source of water at Rymer Point. See Rackham 1986, 355.
- 24 Faith 1997, 156–57.
- 25 Campbell 2005, 153.

- 26 Marten 2008, 2–27.  
 27 Campbell 2005, 155; Warner 1996, 157–59.  
 28 Marten 2008, 21.  
 29 Campbell 2005, 161.  
 30 Roffe identified areas of land in the Welsh Marches, recently colonised and settled and not yet part of the shrieval system, which were recorded in Great Domesday in terms of carucates rather than the hides of more established areas. See Roffe 2007, 198, 206.  
 32 Campbell 2005, 158.  
 33 Cam 1963, 184.  
 34 Much of the lete structure across the county has been reconstructed using later texts, such as the Kalendar of Abbot Samson.  
 35 Harvey 1983, 69.  
 36 Douglas 1928, 377.  
 37 Marten 2008, 21.  
 38 Campbell 2005, 158; Welldon Finn 1967, 105; Hart 1992, 85.  
 39 Maitland 1897, 138; Roffe 2007, 176–82.  
 40 Campbell 2005, 159.  
 41 Martin 2012, 230–34.

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