

The Death of the Ailsworth Witch

by David Hill

A short aside in a longer Saxon charter recounts an exchange between Aethelwold, bishop of Winchester, and Wulfstan Ucca, in which land at Washington, Sussex, was exchanged for an estate at Yaxley, Huntingdonshire, and an estate at Ailsworth, Northamptonshire. The exchange can be dated A.D. 963-975 and is recorded in a later cartulary of Peterborough (Sawyer (1968), no.1377).

The entry has been translated (Whitelock (1955), 519):

'Then the bishop gave the land at Yaxley to Thorney and that at Ailsworth to Peterborough. And a widow and her son had previously forfeited the land at Ailsworth because they drove iron (?) pins into Wulfstan's father, AElfsgie. And it was detected and the murderous instrument dragged from her chamber; and the woman was seized and drowned at London Bridge (*adrencte hi aet Lundene brige*) and her son escaped and became an outlaw. And the land came into the king's possession, and the king gave it to AElfsgie, and his son Wulfstan gave it to Bishop Aethelwold.'

In any modern discussion of late Saxon London this is regarded as the earliest documentary source for the existence of London Bridge (Biddle (1973),23).

Can we take the matter further? Must the reference imply the existence of London Bridge in a period immediately before 948, the date at which AElfsgie received Ailsworth (Sawyer (1968), no.533)? The text tells us that the widow was seized after evidence of witchcraft had been found in her chamber. There can be little doubt that this bower was at Ailsworth in Northamptonshire and it is here that the widow was seized. It seems incredible that a woman taken for witchcraft in northern Northamptonshire should be dragged 82 miles to London to be drowned. Witchcraft usually engendered an immediate hysterical reaction, and it would seem most likely that the widow's execution was at the hands of her rustic neighbours.

Why should she be taken to London? Perhaps there was some sort of court of appeal in London. Possibly King Eadred was in London at the time and the widow was taken to him for judgement. But at that time

the Danelaw was still responsible for much of its own law; the case does not appear to be regalian; and one would expect the church to be active in it. So we are free to discount the need to go to London.

Why then London Bridge, if not in London? Many Anglo-Saxon charters refer to roads, streets and ways by names which indicate their destinations. Generally these destinations are only defined as *Port* or *Wic*, thus giving rise to *Portweg* and *Wicweg*. Less frequent are combinations such as *ceaster herpad*, apparently the road leading from Enford, Hampshire, to the *ceaster*, Winchester (Sawyer (1968), no.427). In Sawyer (1968), no.692 the bounds for Evesty on the Cam brook in Somerset include *pone baep herpad*, the Bath armypath, and the bounds in the charter for Easton near Winchester (A.D.961) (Sawyer (1968), no. 695) has a *lunden Weg*, a London Way. The many bridges in charter bounds have descriptive names as well: 'Wood', 'Black', 'Plank', 'Stone', 'Woodford Bridge'. To this day roads, streets, lanes and bridges named after London are found in many towns and villages.

Is it not probable, then, that the widow was dragged from her bower at Ailsworth, not the 82 miles to London, but to the river Nene, which forms part of the Ailsworth boundary, or to a place of some note as a law centre at the period?

The borough of Stamford was an important centre at this period with judicial functions. It is eight miles from Ailsworth and stands astride the mediaeval route from London to the North. It is probable that Edward, in his campaign of 918 when he constructed a southern, twin, fortification on the south side of Stamford, built a bridge to join the two parts. Here, on the road to London, the river Welland is quite deep enough to provide a miserable end for the widow of Ailsworth.

In Ailsworth itself stands another candidate: the bridge which carried Ermine Street, the Great North Road, across the river Nene. Built by the Romans, it may have been ruinous by late Saxon times; but it must have been a well known landmark, and very close to hand.

Bibliography

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