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HAGLEY HISTORICAL AND FIELD SOCIETY NEWSLETTERS

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LOOK & SEE (May 1986)

We are lucky in Worcestershire and in our neighbouring counties that there are so many towns and villages that have developed over many centuries and so often the development has a mixture of modern, Victorian, Georgian, Tudor and occasionally even earlier, to be seen.

What we see is the last change to be made. Very often what we see, irrespective of its age, replaced something else, for two main reasons. Firstly the original fell down, or became so likely to fall down that replacement was essential. Secondly, the owner became rich and felt a need to show the world by building in the latest style and materials.

This year (in case you had not noticed) is the 900th anniversary of the Domesday Book and the vast majority of places recorded in Worcestershire are still in existence, although in some cases perhaps as a very small hamlet or a single farm.

In the north of the county, the only surviving evidence which was in existence in 1086, is the shaft of an Anglo-Saxon cross at Frankley. These crosses were the focal points for a community before churches were built. Parish priests did not exist in the early life of the Christian church in Anglo-Saxon times. A minster church (in our case Kidderminster) would have a number of roving priests who would visit the local settlement within a radius of 10 or 15 miles, and would hold open air services by the stone cross.

There is little doubt that simple Wooden churches would have been built in the 10th and 11th centuries, but the real evidence of stone churches in this part of the world comes 20 to 80 years after Domesday.

Local examples of Norman churches can be found at Hagley, Bell End, Belbroughton, Pedmore, Romsley, Frankley, Clent, Chaddesley Corbett, Bromsgrove and Halesowen. In all of these examples the architectural style has been superseded by Early English, Decorated or Perpendicular styles. Most of the churches have been rebuilt at least once or have had major additions made to an original building.

As with towns and villages, the local church is a good barometer of the peaks of wealth enjoyed by one or more people down the centuries.

Next time you visit an old church and work out the clues giving the ages of the various parts of the building, see if you can also sort out the reasons why someone was able to afford the cost of rebuilding or the extension.

THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE IN 1086 (September 1986)

The following notes are based on a personal interpretation of the various Domesday Book entries for North East Worcestershire.

Stepping back in time 900 years, we would notice many things in the landscape that are very different to the present day scene.

The main reason for the difference is the very much smaller population. For every 50 persons around today there would have been one in 1086, but even so agriculture had a quarter of the available land under cultivation, or more accurately one eighth was growing crops and one eighth was fallow. For the remainder, most would be described in the Domesday Book as woodland. This was not well organised blocks of trees, all of one type but more like the "natural" parts of Kinver or Walton Hill with a mixture of trees, shrubs., ferns, brambles, thorn bush and so on.

Two areas of woodland are very small compared with the rest. One is Hagley Wood with 180 acres, and the other is at Bellington with 160 acres, suggesting some form of managed woodland, perhaps coped or pollarded in rotation.

Bellington lies on the south side of Barnet Hill, and is described as being waste. This is the only local example of "waste" land. Many more can be found, particularly as you go north, and it means that the land is no longer under cultivation. The potential at Bellington was a little less than Hagley, but the difference today is enormous - Bellington is a farmhouse built some three centuries ago and Hagley is a large residential village and there is only a mile or so between them.

In today's landscape it is difficult to escape from power in various forms, such as electricity pylons and cables, or cars, lorries and tractors or our well heated and lit homes. In 1086 manpower, ox power, wood fires were the fashion and water mills were the only device that converted one form of power into another that was of some use. Mill ponds were not an essential adjunct to early water wheels. Frequently a fast running stream in a steep gully would be a good site for a simple water wheel with paddles rather than buckets to drive the shaft and the associated mill stones.

Local examples of mills would be found in the manors of Oldswinford (Lower High Street, Stourbridge), three in Chaddesley Corbett, two in Kidderminster and three in Bromsgrove. At this time most of the buildings would have had wooden frames with thatched roofs and wattle and daub walls. Several manors had priests and it is reasonable to assume that simple churches existed and some almost certainly incorporated stonework in their walls.

At Dudley there was a wooden castle high on a motte, or mound, designed to impress on the local Saxons the fact that they should look up to William fitz Ansculf, their overlord.

This sketch of our locality 900 years ago is intended to set out some of the changes in the landscape, and perhaps this helps to bring into perspective all the other changes that have occurred in the same period of time.