

# *The Bowdon Sheaf*

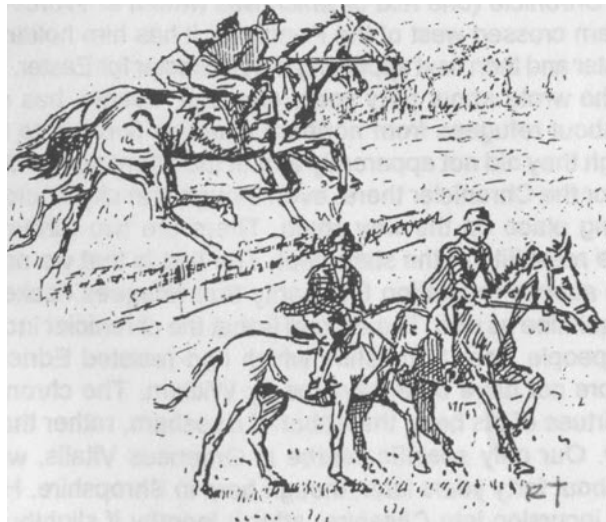
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## Contents

The Harrying of the North by Stephen Matthews.

Some early Vicars of Bowdon by Maurice Ridgway.

The Nook Riding School.



*The Nook Riding School, Bowdon*

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## **Hale, Bowdon and the Harrying of the North, 1069**

**By Stephen Matthews**

One of the oft repeated tales of the Norman Conquest is that of the harrying of the north, that grim trail of destruction across northern England that left the countryside so devastated as to be uninhabitable for decades afterwards. The evidence for it is said to be the many references in Domesday Book to places which were 'waste' in 1086. This is so engrained in our historical belief that it is almost sacrilegious to question it - but nevertheless, is it entirely true?

Before looking at Domesday two points must be made. The first is that there is a distinction to be made between what happened to the east and west of the Pennines. There is no doubt that Yorkshire and the northeast suffered a terrible punishment for repeated rebellion - although the extent of that has been questioned in the last decade or so - and the evidence lies not only in Domesday but in chronicle narratives. There is much less evidence for Cheshire. The county had been involved in an apparently minor uprising in support of Edric the Wild, who was based in Herefordshire and the Welsh Marches. This culminated in the sacking of Shrewsbury but the rebels had melted away when faced with the royal army. Crucially, Cheshire was not involved in events east of the Pennines nor did its Mercian Earl cause William any trouble. As far as Norman retribution is concerned it is interesting what the chroniclers did not say. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (one text of which was written at Worcester) does not say that William crossed west of the Pennines: it has him holding his court in York at Midwinter and then next appearing at Winchester for Easter. The Evesham Chronicler, who wrote about forty years after the events, has a generalised observation about refugees from northern counties flocking to his Abbey for support, though they did not apparently attract the attention of either 'Florence' of Worcester or the Chronicler there, even though that city would have been a logical stopping place on the way south. There are two further reasons for suspecting the reliability of the statement. The first is that we are told that so great was the abbot's reputation for charity that refugees flocked there from Ireland and Aquitaine as well. The second is that the chronicler included among the refugees people from Shropshire which had resisted Edric's attack and should therefore not have been ravaged by William. The chronicler is really 'puffing' the virtues of his hero, the Abbot of Evesham, rather than writing objective history. Our only specific source is Ordericus Vitalis, writing in Normandy, also about forty years later, though born in Shropshire. He does mention William's incursion into Cheshire, after a lengthy if slightly muddled account of the fighting in the north east.

His account is brief:

"Then he undertook an expedition against the Welsh and the men of Chester, who had recently crowned their many lawless acts by besieging Shrewsbury. His army, which had already endured great hardship, feared that even greater trials were in store in this journey. They feared the wildness of the region, the severity of winter, the scarcity of food, and the terrible ferocity of the enemy. The king, however, maintained a calmness worthy of Julius Caesar in this crisis, and did not deign to attempt to hold them with prayers and promises. He continued on the venture he had so boldly undertaken, commanded his faithful troops to follow him, and counted any who chose to desert him as idle cowards and weaklings. And so he pushed on with determination along a road no horseman had attempted before, over steep mountains and precipitous valleys, through rivers and rushing streams and deep abysses. As they stumbled along the path they were lashed with rain and hail. Sometimes all were obliged to feed on horses which had perished in the bogs. The king himself, remarkably sure footed, led the foot soldiers, readily helping them with his own hands when they were in difficulties. So at last he brought his army safely to Chester and suppressed all risings throughout Mercia with royal power. He built a castle at Chester and another at Stafford on his return, garrisoning both and supplying them with abundant provisions. Then going on to Salisbury he distributed lavish rewards to the soldiers for all they had endured..."

This account makes clear that William's army was exhausted, demoralised and probably not very large. It moved with difficulty in the wet clays of a Cheshire winter, its main desire apparently being simply to keep on the march. There is no mention of either serious opposition, fighting or of widespread destruction. The only overt mention of destruction is in Domesday, in the reduced number of houses in Chester but this was probably caused by the building of the castle in the existing urban area, as it was in many other cities like York and Lincoln. Without citing them, we may note that other chroniclers, like Simeon of Durham, make no more than generalised statements about the cruel Normans.

With this lack of specific support from chroniclers in mind, let us look at the evidence from Domesday. There the great question is the meaning of 'waste'? Usually, it has been taken to mean just that - the land was wasted, useless, uninhabitable - and this has given us the traditional picture of a derelict landscape. This view has been increasingly challenged. Historians recognised that it created difficulties, for some places, like Nether Peover (in the table below), were said to be 'waste' but nevertheless paid tax or had a value. Northenden was 'waste' but had a church and was worth three shillings. The explanation was unsatisfactory for it involved giving different meanings to the word in different places, to suit the desired interpretation. Thus in 'Welsh' Cheshire it was said to mean that the land was fit and habitable but not rich enough to yield a profit to a landlord, whilst in 'English' Cheshire it meant that it was derelict. This is illogical and has been increasingly challenged, with a uniformity of meaning being adopted, similar to that applied to 'Welsh' Cheshire: that the Domesday values indicated no more than the level of profit to be obtainable by a landlord. How then do we view the area round Hale and Bowdon and interpret the ravaging march of William's army? First, we must note that although William is generally

supposed to have followed the line of the old Roman Road from Manchester to Chester, there is no clear and undisputable scar of devastation either along it or from a crossing point via the Mersey nearer to Warrington. A table of entries for our immediate area will show how places fared:

Values in Shillings. \* = tax paid even though the place described as 'waste'.  
For example, in Peover N, the entry shows both 'waste' and worth 12d.

Column 1 = place; 2 = VCH reference; 3 = Value in 1066; 4 = Value 1069;  
5 = Value 1086; 6 = Occupier 1086; 7 see above.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Hale	229	15	W	12	Hamon	
Bowdon	228	W	W	3	Hamon	*
Ashley	231	W		W	Hamon	
Tatton	191			4	W Fitz Neil	
Tatton	272			3	Ranulph	
Mobberley	236	12	W	5	Bigot	
Lower Tabley	269	W		W	Joscelin	*
Over Tabley	194	10?	W	W	W Fitz N	*
Do	195	7	W	W	W Fitz N	*
Dunham	227	12	W	10	Hamon	
Mere	257	8	W	W	Gilbert deVen	*
Rostherne	259	4	W		Gilbert deVen	*
Lymm	292	10	W	8	Osben	
Warburton	190	5		2	W Fitz N	
Warburton	293	5	W	2	Osben	
Peover Neth	196	5	W	W	W Fitz N 12d	*
Peover Sup	273	15	W	4	Ranulph	
Peover	258	W		W	Gilbert	*
Peover	275				Ranulph	*
Budworth	205	6		8	W Fitz N	
Brereton	262	20	W	20	Gilbert	
High Legh	255	10		5	Gilbert	
Sunderland	313	3		W	Gil/Ham/Ran	*
Millington	192	W		W	W Fitz N	*

The inescapable conclusions from these values are:

1. Whatever the extent of devastation in 1069, many places had made a substantial recovery by 1086 so that it is not possible to think about large swathes of east Cheshire lying derelict and uninhabitable by that date.
2. The reductions in value do not suggest a clear line of attack as is so often stated. Why should Bowdon, right on the presumed line of attack, be worth more in 1086 than 1066? On the other side of the road, Dunham lost little value. The two Tableys moved in the opposite direction. Why should Mobberley, further away, have suffered more?
3. A number of places were 'waste' in 1066 and their state cannot therefore be blamed upon any action by William or his army. D. Hill (Atlas of Anglo- Saxon England) suggests Welsh attacks in the Confessor's reign as the cause, but this is not wholly convincing for the east of the county.

Whatever damage William did, there were clearly many other factors at work: the competence of the occupiers as landlords, the effects of earlier wars with the Welsh and of the uprising before William entered the county as well as the general fragility of the economy, with poor returns dating back to the Confessor's reign. 'Waste' was nothing new.

### **Further Reading**

A fuller version of this paper should appear in Northern History during 2003. The most directly relevant recent study is D.M. Palliser; Domesday Book and the 'Harrying of the North', Northern History, 29, (1993), which has a considerable bibliography. It covers events east of the Pennines.

A.R.Bridbury; 'Domesday Book: a re-interpretation', in The English Economy From Bede to the Reformation (1992).

### **Some early Vicars of Bowdon by Maurice Ridgway**

On looking through some of the back numbers of Bowdon Sheaf I find that I wrote articles on Richard Wroe (1681-1690) and James Law (1815- 1821). These are to be found in issues of the Bowdon Sheaf Nos 11 to 13. As we have now reached No 39 it seems proper that I should submit something on some of the early Vicars and priests at Bowdon and leave the later Vicars to somebody else (especially one who was there from 1962).

The generally accepted list of Vicars of Bowdon, recorded on a board at the west end of the church, contains almost fifty names, but as this list begins in 1210, at the time of Magna Carta, there is ample evidence to show that there are over 500 years in which the names are not recorded. Over 1200 years of Parsons!! Of the rest I have been able to gather together little bits of information and I can now pass it on - even then I can only touch the fringe of the cassocks of many more, but it forms quite a fascinating study of an interesting group of persons.

Ignatius, writing in the second century as he was taken across Asia Minor to become the afternoon's enjoyment in the Colosseum at Rome (to become lions' meat) came to write *Ubi episcopus ibi ecclesia* - Where the Bishop is there is the church, But as many prefer to ignore the writings of the Apostolic Fathers this dictum is forgotten or not known. But to return to Bowdon. From the earliest times the parish priest is put there by the Bishop. In a true sense he is put there for the Gospel to be preached, converts baptised and the faithful fed by sacrament and prayer within a special district named a Parish. His jurisdiction and liturgy is part of the laws of England. It is sometimes forgotten that the Church in England was one before England was established as a separate country. We should remember that when talking about the 'disestablishment of the Church'.

It is a curious coincidence that the first parish priest known by name at Bowdon was Gilbert, at the time of Magna Carta, a document which upholds the freedom and independence of the Church of England, called in the document *Ecclesia Anglicana*, a phrase which was not popular at the reformation but is nevertheless true.

In the late 14th Century, Bowdon lay between the rival holders of the Manor, The Prior of Birkenhead and the Massey family of Hale. Thomas Massey carried off the Tithe corn though he had no right to it. The parson informed the Prior of Birkenhead who settled the matter but three sons of the Masseys 'beat up later the Holy Water Clerk of Bowdon'. Richard de Wever was appointed by the Masseys of Hale who entered the vicarage and held it by force until Palm Sunday, threatening that they would not profit until one of their number was made Vicar, even though one was eighteen years old. Efforts to pinch rich livings may have accounted for the local proverb, old in the 17th Century, that 'everyone is not born to be Vicar of Bowdon'.

So to the time of the Reformation and the time of Thomas Runcorn who Was Vicar of Bowdon from 1535 to 1557. In his time he saw the dissolution of the monasteries, including the Birkenhead Priory who held the Advowson, the right of presentation to the Vicarage at Bowdon. He witnessed the formation of the new Diocese of Chester in 1541 now partitioned off from the Lichfield, Coventry and Chester Diocese, survived the troublesome times of Edward VI and Mary Tudor but did not reach the reign of Elizabeth for he died in 1557. He had come to Bowdon as Vicar in 1535 on 1 February, fourteen years before the first Book of Common Prayer was introduced. He had already been at Oxford, obtaining a BA in 1518 and MA in 1521 and four years later became Archdeacon of Bangor; resigning a little later but restored in 1541 whilst still Vicar of Bowdon. In his day plurality was rife. Thomas Runcorn excelled in this so was probably non-resident for a good deal of the time, leaving his duties to a Vicar (Vice Cure by definition for he would be the Curate who was in charge. Curate means Cure of Souls, used still at the time of induction). At Bowdon the Diocesan list gives Dominus William Wright 'Exstipendio Thomas Runcorn'.

Where was Thomas Runcorn? He was also Rector of Llanrhaeadr in 1543; at Winchester he was a Canon in 1541; Weaverham in 1554 and also Bebington the same year; Prebendary of Chester 1552 and Canon of Lichfield 1553, and still at Bowdon and by then also Archdeacon of Bangor. When the Priory of Birkenhead ceased, Bowdon was given to the new Diocese of Chester 1541. The first Bishop of Chester was John Bird and the new Dean of Chester was the new titular head of the Cathedral who had been the last Abbot of the Benedictine Monastery of Chester, now the Cathedral. His time as Dean was very short for he died the same year and was followed by Henry Mann, a one-time Carthusian Monk. Bishop Bird would have remained Bishop but he had married and Queen Mary did not like married clergy and removed him. By then the advowson of Bowdon had been sold to Edward Janney of Manchester, so when a vacancy occurred on the death of Thomas Runcorn in 1557, his executor, Robert Vawdrey presented the living to John Hanson, a graduate of Balliol, Oxford, who had been Rector of Stapleton Tawney in Essex, Worlingworth in Suffolk and Thornington. Bishop Cotes, who had followed Bishop Bird at Chester, had known Hanson at Balliol also made him Archdeacon of Richmond (then in the Diocese of Chester). After Queen Mary's reign he retired, along with Bishop Cotes, to Louvain in Belgium where he died in exile in 1565.

To return to Thomas Runcorn, he was buried at Bebington in the Wirral and his will (dated 1556) was reprinted in the Cheshire Sheaf. It gives a great deal of information on the man and his habits. He disposes of his horses: to Sir Thomas Hokcroft his bay Hampshire gelding, to Lady Grosvenor his bay gelding, to Robert Fletcher 'my young trotting horse and a nag that runneth at Sutton, to William Troutbeck a gelding and to his brother and sister another gelding and a nag. He was generous to his servants; both in England and Wales, £10 to two women in Beaumaris where he had a house, and £6.13.4 to the Poor of Bowdon. Gowns, books and a ring to various friends. To Bebington a gown, a vestment, superaltar and corporas; to Mr Gregorie a hogshead of wine, and £10 to Mr Ellis if he will take good ways and the silver deposited by his sister as security on a loan with the pawnbroker to be repayed and returned to her.

John Hanson was also Vicar of Runcorn but was deprived in 1561. He was followed by Robert Vawdrey, the son of the executor of Thomas Runcorn. We do find, however, that one Adam Wood claimed to be Vicar of Bowdon in 1559 but as his name appears in the will of Robert Booth of Dunham it is possible he was his chaplain at Dunham Hall.

Robert Vawdrey remained at Bowdon for about twenty years, for we learn he gave evidence at the divorce of George Booth and Elizabeth Massey that she was 'only three years old at the time and that she stood on a form in the chancel of Bowdon church betwixt the arms of Isabel Cleworth and could not pronounce the words correctly'.

Robert Vawdrey was followed by William Legh in 1582.

## The Nook Riding School by Ronald Trenbath

The Nook Riding School was situated, for many years, on Bow Lane near to West Bank Farm which the Chester family farmed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It was the leading centre providing tuition in equitation by an experienced Riding Master, high class riding horses for hire or purchase and livery facilities for hunters, under the proprietorship of John Chester. The establishment closed in 1947 to be worked as a small holding during the next twenty years.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23rd, 1947**

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**THE NOOK RIDING SCHOOL,**  
**BOW LANE, BOWDON, ALTRINCHAM, Ches.**

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**J. MAINWARING, STAFFORD & Co.**  
Auctioneers and Valuers, Warrington and St. Helens  
have received instructions from Mr. John K. Chester,  
who is leaving the district, to

**SELL BY AUCTION**  
on the above date

**12** GOOD CLASS RIDING PONIES, 5 to 8 years.  
13.2 to 16 hds.  
(All well known quiet to ride, several Jumpers, and several  
quiet to drive)

**2** UPSTANDING WORKING HORSES

**9** CAPITAL YOUNG DAIRY COWS  
(Newly-calved Incalf for Nov. and Dec. and in full milk)

**12** TONS RED INTERMEDIATE AND YELLOW  
GLOBE MANGOLDS

**50** BOXES of ULSTER EARL SEED POTATOES  
FORDSON TRACTOR on Iron cleats  
QUANTITY of SADDLERY, and  
SURPLUS FARM IMPLEMENTS, etc.

including 9 excellent Riding Saddles, 12 Riding Bridles,  
Martingales, Rugs, Blankets, 12 Night Halters, Novice  
Rocking Horse, Saddle Horse, Harness Cupboard, Set of  
Shaft Gears, Pair of Plough Pads, Leading Chains, Sundry  
Harness, Corn and Provender Bins, Iron Water Troughs,  
Combustion Stove, Stable Utensils, Blackstone Potato  
Digger, Davey Sleep Balance Plough, Wheel Plough,  
Cultivator, 6 Milk Tankards, 2 Green's Lawn Mowers,  
2 Poultry Houses, Sundry Timber and Miscellaneous Effects.

Sale to commence at 1.30 p.m. with Implements & Saddlery  
Cattle 2.30, Horses 2.45

The Riding Ponies may be inspected on Wednesday, October 22nd,  
from 2.0 to 5.0 p.m.

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