

PRISTON'S DODGY CHARTER

In 2009, **Clare Cross** wrote a Link article on the Priston Charter of A.D.931. In her first paragraph she highlighted that all was not as it seemed:

Priston's charter of A.D. 931 gifting 10 hides of land to the Minster in Bath has long been regarded by historians as a forgery. One of the factors pointing to its forgery is that in the Priston document some of the clerics listed in the witness list did not hold those particular posts in 931 and indeed the list appears to have been copied from a charter of A.D. 941 (drawn up by Aethelstan's successor Eadmund).

She went on to point out that opinion has changed over the years:

However, the latest scholar to examine all the charters [S.E. Kelly (ed), Anglo-Saxon Charters 13: Charters of Bath and Wells, Oxford, 2007] feels there is maybe some contemporary truth enmeshed within the extraordinary narrative. The story behind the charter itself is unique in its recording of sensational personal detail. It states that King Aethelstan granted the estates in both Priston and Cold Ashton to the Minster[of Bath] because they belonged to a discredited Anglo-Saxon thegn† Alfred, who was involved in an attempt to blind Aethelstan in Winchester early in his reign. The plot was foiled and possibly Alfred fled to Rome or possibly he was sent, as the text says, to clear himself by undertaking an oath to the Pope stating his innocence. He apparently died in Rome and was therefore judged to have perjured himself, so proving his guilt.

† A lord who held his land directly from the king in return for military service in time of war.

Last week our son Henry asked if I'd seen the original (forged or unforged) translation of that visit to Rome. I hadn't – but I have now! The document is a joy to read, in its verbosity, sycophancy and in some parts imprecision. If the document is a forgery someone took a lot of trouble over it. The *dramatis personae* is formidable, especially as Clare points out that some of the clerics mentioned were not even in office at that time. And the “strike me dead if I lie” element of the story would make a good TV plot. Here follows some of the document. [If it's all too much skip to the end, where your local knowledge is requested]:

*' In the name of God the supreme and most high. With assured corroboration holy and just fathers admonish us with frequent prayers that God, in Whom we delight and believe with the innermost affection of our mind, we should fear and love unceasingly with a love of good works, Who will give recompense for all our deeds on the Day of Judgment according to the merit of each one; and so we try with the keenest striving of our mind to imitate Him. Although we are oppressed by the burden of mortal life and polluted by the transitory possessions of this world, yet through the bounty of His compassion we seek to purchase the eternal rewards of the heavenly life with transitory wealth. Wherefore I, Æthelstan, inflamed by a desire for the heavenly kingdom, with the favour of Heavenly Grace king of the English and of other neighbouring peoples, have taken care to commit [this] to writing so that our words and deeds should not be negated with the passage of time, either through the lack of care of our successors or through some kind of envy or dishonesty, and be able at length to come into contention amongst our successors. With the agreement and authorisation of my bishops and many nobles, I, giving at the church with devout intent, shall give for all time to Almighty God and St Peter the Apostle and the venerable community that is located in the famous place that rustics in appellative narration call Bath, ten hides in the place that is called **Priston**, and we grant the mandate in the name of the Governor enthroned on high, that no man puffed up by the swellings of pride might attack it, neither a king nor a bishop nor a princeps nor a prepositus nor persons of any station, who might dare to change this aforementioned liberty into the annoyance [reading 'molestiam' for MS 'molestia'] of any burden, either in our days or [in those] of our successors; but may it be free from every worldly burden, except these: military service [and] the renewal of bridge and fortress, with all that is recognised as belonging to that very place, with fields, pastures, meadows [and] woods, to the end that for my sins and [those] of my father, King Edward, they will offer beneficial masses daily to God for us and the melodious melodies of psalm-singing will not cease to fight for us with spiritual arms against invisible enemies*

..... Let wise men of our realm know that we have not seized these aforementioned lands unjustly and given the plunder to God, but I have accepted them just as all the nobles of the realm of the English adjudged them, and also the apostolic pope of the Roman church, John, on the death of Alfred, who was envious of our good fortune and life, conspiring in the wickedness of our enemies when they wished to blind me in the city of Winchester on the death of my father, if God in His goodness had not snatched me away; but with their machinations laid bare, Alfred was sent to the church at Rome to defend himself there by swearing an oath before the Apostolic John; and this he did before the altar of St Peter. But when the oath had been

sworn, he fell down before the altar and was carried by the hands of his servants to the schola Anglorum, and there he ended his life on the third night. And then the pope sent word to us and consulted with us as to what should be done with him, whether his body should be placed with other Christians. After these things had happened and been reported to us, the nobles of our realm with a throng of his relatives entreated with all humility that his body should, with our permission, be placed with the bodies of Christians, and on our agreeing to their entreaty we sent word back to Rome and, with the pope's agreement, he was placed with other Christians, although he was unworthy. And so all his property, great and small, was adjudged to me. But, so that it will not be terminated as long as Christianity prevails, we have also recorded these things in writing, [namely,] whence the aforementioned property that I gave to God and St Peter was given to me; nor do I know of anything more just than that I should give this property to God and St Peter, who caused my rival to fall in the sight of all, and has bestowed on me health and the good fortune of a kingdom.

There were no less than 28 witnesses to this, of the highest clerical calibre, most of them bishops (though one was either illiterate – unlikely - or so old that he had to sign with an X). Then comes the description of the boundaries of the 10 hides of Priston land (a hide was roughly 120 acres but was also a tax assessment area). This is where your input is invited. The Charter states:

First on the old edenan ford; from the ford to hwitda coomb; along the coomb upstream to the high west along the high-road to the pierced stone; from the stone to the hoarstone; from the stone into the old willow; from the willow due north to the Lox; along the Lox upstream to the west part of Leomann's coppiced wood; then north along the old ditch [or 'dyke'] to red ford; from red ford to the street; along the street straight up to the west part of wynma down to the high-road; along the high-road due east to Ælfsige's stone; from the stone back down to the old edenan ford.

We (Clare Cross, Henry Anderson, Aylet Anderson) think that this may translate in part to:

- **First on the old edenan ford; from the ford to hwitda coomb**: from Bulford Bridge / ford to the Whidlecombe Brook (*hwitda coomb*); From the confluence of what we now know as the Conygre and Priston Brooks into the Newton Brook appears to have been called the Eden
- **along the coomb upstream to the high road**: along the Whidlecombe upstream to the high road (the Nailwell-Priston Lane and then the Blind Lane herepath and onto what is now the B3115 heading towards Timsbury);
- **west along the high-road to the pierced stone; from the stone to the hoarstone; from the stone into the old willow**: (these landmarks have presumably all disappeared?); we think the boundary then passed west of the old hill fort at Tunley
- **from the willow due north to the Lox**: The Lox [salmon] brook is the Priston Brook.
- **Along the Lox upstream to the west part of Leomann's coppiced wood**: westward upstream on the Priston Brook along the west side of Priston Wood, to what is now called Lammasfield but in the 18th century was called Lehmannsfeld)
- **Then north along the old ditch [or dyke] to the red ford**. This suggests a sharp right turn onto the 'ancient trackway, which leads to the sharp righthand bend on the Priston – Farmborough Lane where the Farmborough village sign is located. The earth to the west of the lane is, as everyone will know, red earth, so that seems to confirm a crossing of the Conygre Brook near New Farm
- **from red ford to the street; along the street straight up to the west part of wynma down to the high-road; along the high-road due east to Ælfsige's stone; from the stone back down to the old edenan ford**: We suspect that by 'The Street' they meant the herepath which is now the lane along the top of the Wilmington ridge. Ælfsige's stone was possibly at the east end of Wilmington hamlet, where the Class 5 highway nowadays leads back down to Bulford Bridge (old Edeman ford). Final query. Is Bulford bridge that old?

Aylet Anderson
July 2020