

## Anglo-Saxon Charters

You'll have noticed, for sure, that the Staffordshire Hoard is currently making a triumphal tour of the Midlands. Like some marauding Saxon *fyrð* (their name for small army) it has conquered Birmingham and Stoke, and lately moved on to Stafford, Lichfield and Tamworth.

A second exhibition, just as interesting, is pursuing the Saxon gold around the region, helping to fill in the puzzling jigsaw of history we call the Dark Ages.

Two things defined the man of status in the Anglo-Saxon age. One was gold (preferably large quantities of the stuff) and the other was land. Both could be, and were, handed out by a grateful king to his faithful thegns as an act of formal (and calculated) generosity. No doubt gold felt mighty good in the hand, but land offered greater continuity of possession, and was not as easily mislaid.

From the moment such gifts of land were set down on parchment, the Dark Ages become a good deal lighter. It's not simply that the document implies a shift into an age of literacy; the survival of such charters can shine a light onto the people who wrote and signed it in ways that archaeology never can.

So important did written evidence of landownership become that the estate itself was known as "bookland". And holding onto a charter was the only sure way of ensuring that the land remained yours. That is why so many of these documents have been passed down to us, along with (I might add) a fair few forgeries too.

Around 1,500 Anglo-Saxon charters have been preserved in all, of which only 200 survive as individual documents. Staffordshire Record Office has more than its fair share of these, including one of the most important of all, the Will of Wulfric Spot, dating back to 1004.

To coincide the arrival of the Staffordshire Hoard, many of these charters were on display in the record office. They are, sadly, too precious to go on tour with the Hoard, but the exhibition which accompanied them is making the journey.

Typically each charter describes lands granted by a king to an individual, or an individual to a church or abbey. Best known are the charters which outline the estates with which Wulfric endowed the abbey of Burton-on-Trent, or those which Wulfrun gave to the minster in Wolverhampton in 985. As it happens Wulfrun may well have been the mother of Wulfric, though this is not certain.

The land that Wulfrun was so generous with was, in turn, inherited from her father Wulfsige, who received it from the king. It is, in part, being able to identify the land they owned that allows us to create this family tree, one of the most important in the Anglo-Saxon Midlands.

Defining a piece of real estate in those times, and setting it down on paper, was far from easy. There were no maps and no easily identified boundaries; roads were few and sat-navs even fewer. The scribe, then, was obliged to describe the place by readily recognised features of the landscape, a well-known tree or barrow, a stream or the bridge over it. Imagine having to define your garden not by the fences, but by the location of the rose-bush and the dustbin.

The charter gives us, as it were, a picture of the land as a Saxon saw it, the crops and woodland, the natural features and the man-made ones. Wulfrun's charter, for example, begins like this: "First where the goose brook runs into Saeffan marsh, thence against the stream as far as Seven Springs brook, from the brook to one spring, from the spring to the other spring, from the spring into the dyke, along the dyke to a pool..."

Wulfrun's grant begins to the north of Wolverhampton with "Goose Brook", a tributary of Smestow Brook which gave its name both to Gorsebrook House and to the road that still exists today. The area further to the north of this was indeed wet moorland, recalled in the names Oxley Moor and Marsh Lane. From here the description moves clockwise, defining as it goes the boundaries with Bilston and Sedgley.

Of course, no charter was worth the parchment it was written on unless it had been formally witnessed. The best time and place for that was at the royal court, when the king had assembled around him all the leading figures in the land. Wulfric's will, and the king's confirmation of it, was set down while King Aethelred was holding his Christmas court in 1004, probably in Shropshire.

The signatures number almost fifty, including almost a dozen bishops and the same number of abbots. Here was the political and theological guarantee, it was hoped, that the lands would not be infringed, stolen or alienated.

The king's name at the foot of a charter also help us to track where he was at a particular time. Saxon monarchs tended to be peripatetic, constantly moving around their kingdom, even when they were not at war. It was a way of spreading the cost of the royal court, as well as stamping his authority on all the corners of his realm.

So, if the Staffordshire Hoard still poses more questions than it answers - where was it from, who owned it and who buried it - the charters begin to make the world of late Anglo-Saxon England a little clearer. We can meet its people and walk in their land.