Author:

Adrian Mongredien

Homecroft Drive
Packington

LE65 1WG

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Packington: Early History - BC to 11th Century

Packington Village History Group PVHG

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Author's Foreword

My joining the local Village History Group a couple of years ago encouraged me to look at "English" history from a different perspective; that of our local Packington community. How, and when, did it come into existence? How did it fit into the wider world of that era? How did its inhabitants live and survive its turbulent beginnings, and what have we inherited from the various tribes who have lived here before us?

The setting up of the Packington Village History Group (PVHG) website at https://pvhg.uk gave impetus to the concept of a written history, as it became clear that a website provided the possibility for the continuous updating of any new local history information as it became available.

The final prompt was my recent discovery that, under new government guidelines, history is no longer taught as a compulsory subject, or in a chronological format in the secondary school years. How would the next generation find out about our local ancestors and how they had coped with the huge challenges which faced them? I decided to unfold my laptop and attempt to put some answers to some of these questions on our new website.

As I compiled my information. I realised that there are a dwindling number of us left who still think primarily in "imperial measurements", are comfortable with furlongs, chains, yards, feet and inches, or perhaps struggle with a metrical world, hence the section on Anglo-Saxon measurements.

My thanks go, principally, to Robin Boucher and Sue Brown of PVHG who have given much time to go through several drafts of this manuscript and correct mistakes and suggest alterations and additions which have been greatly beneficial to the final text. Thanks also to Robert Dilworth for setting up the Packington Village History Group website which kick started this idea, and to all the other members of the group for their support. Thanks go to Kate, my wife, for her support and endless cups of tea, and to other members of my family for their input on editing.

Responsibility for errors in the final text are mine alone.

The "final text" is of course a misnomer, as all those interested in history will know. We are only ever a spade's depth, or the sweep of a metal detector, away from discovering new facts which may turn "the world upside down" at a moment's notice, as long-term members of the "Richard the Third" Society will confirm.

Adrian Mongredien

Packington

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THE EARLIEST YEARS.

We cannot be sure when the first human traveller passed across the land that we now know as Packington, paused for a drink in the local brook, and then trudged on to "civilisation" or at least a safer place to put their head down for the night.

There is definite evidence that, possibly as early as 4,000 BC, somebody dropped, or left behind near here, an essential piece of their equipment. This item was later found somewhere in the Ordnance Survey square kilometre known as SK3614, which includes the centre of Packington. The Portable Antiquities Scheme records show that a late Neolithic (4,000-2,200BC), or maybe Bronze Age (2,200-700BC) flint thumbnail scraper was found relatively recently in this square kilometre, but no further details are available. These thumbnail scrapers were not, as you might suppose for manicuring your nails but razor sharp pieces of flint for skinning dead animals for the pot or, in the case of foxes and wolves, for making your winter coat.

There is promising evidence from recent aerial surveys, of ancient linear crop marks (with associated circular features) between the A42 and Measham Road situated just a few hundred metres west of Packington. One of these circular features approximately 10 metres in diameter, and with an apparent entrance on its south east side, may well be the remains of an Iron Age (700-43BC) roundhouse.

Research on the Roman occupation of England indicates that while there was no settlement here, there may have been a Roman Road through Packington in about 100-300 AD. This road linked Watling Street (now the A5) at Tamworth with Redhill in Nottinghamshire, crossing the river Trent at Sawley (now the B5640). The route of this Roman Road appears to pass through the middle of what we now call Packington on a south-west to north-east axis. (From Measham Road across High Street and Normanton Road to Coleorton Lane). It would have mainly been used by the Roman military, but there is no evidence that they left any mark on Packington other than possibly, some long ago washed out sandal-prints.

There is another Roman Road which is reputed to pass close to Packington. This is the "Via Devana" which is thought to run from Colchester, through Leicester and on to Chester. There is plenty of evidence for its existence between Colchester and Leicester, but after that traces of it are hard to come by. There was a find a few years ago of a portion of Roman Road, near Moira, but how this links in is not clear at present. There is a Notice Board in Packington Wood, at the back of Normandy Wood, that suggests that the Via Devana may have crossed through what is now part of the recently planted National Forest and headed up to Five Ways junction, crossing the proposed route of HS2 at that point. No firm archaeological evidence has yet confirmed this.

The Roman occupation of England had collapsed by about 440 AD (according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle). Very little archaeological evidence has been discovered across the midlands area between that date and the beginning of the 7th century (600 AD). This period is still called by historians "The Dark Ages" because so little is known about it.

Most historians think the Roman culture went on for at least a couple of generations after the Romans officially left, which was in 410 AD when Roman emperor of the time Honorius had issued a decree stating that he "would supply no more troops to Britain. They would have to make do with what forces were left".

It seems as though leaders of wealthy Roman families living in Romanised England may have set up local fiefdoms to try and rule their areas and coordinate attempts to keep out the raiding Picts and Scots from the north. One of these Roman leaders called Vortigern, believed to come from Gloucestershire, eventually had the rather far reaching idea of "inviting" mercenaries from north-western Europe to settle in eastern England to help defend the country from these northern invaders.

THE ANGLO-SAXONS ARRIVE.

This move appears to have backfired as rather more Anglo-Saxons arrived than was intended. The historian "Bede", writing a couple of centuries later stated… "the Germanic mercenaries sent word back to their homeland that the country (England) was fertile, and the Britons cowardly, inspiring others to come over"…. The homeland of some of the Anglo-Saxons was in what is now called Schleswig-Holstein, in Northern Germany. There is still an area there called "Angeln".

Current thinking is that over a period of many years the Anglo- Saxons "incomers" gradually pushed the Romanised Celtic Britons westward towards what we now call Wales. There are still a few Celtic place names in the local midlands area that indicate that Britons speaking a version of Welsh may have continued to occupy them. Places such as Walton-on- Trent, and Wall just south of Lichfield. Penkridge near Cannock is also a Celtic name which means a "burial mound on a hill" in the Celtic language.

We know that the Angles had been settling in the east of England and "farming" from about 450AD onwards. It seems reasonable to suppose that within a short time of their arrival they would have started growing crops on the flat, rich, arable land there.

Newer arrivals would spread out westwards as their numbers increased. They would look for sites which possessed a number of the following necessary attributes:- First and foremost access to a constant fresh water supply, then building materials, dry sites for housing, fertile soils, grazing land, and initially, a defensible position. These varying essential requirements, especially the initial need for defence, explain why so many ancient fields and land boundaries in England have such a variety of shapes and sizes.

The early settlers arrived by boat. They may have sailed up the River Trent in their flat bottomed boats, and have continued their journey up the river Mease. The early annals of the medieval chronicles record an invasion of the midlands from East Anglia in the early 6th century. This accords with the archaeological evidence from pagan cemeteries. (In pagan graves the bodies did not lie in an east-west alignment and frequently contained "grave goods") The current view of historians of this era is that the Angles came into our region from the east, probably with a small number of Saxons travelling up the river valley of the Trent and also the river Nene in Northamptonshire. Dates vary between 515 and 527 AD. Nottingham is thought to have been established in the 6th century. Many battles, or skirmishes, were fought in, or near, our local area before the Celtic Britons finally retreated as far as Cannock Chase, and modern Shropshire by about 600 AD.

THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

At almost the same time another small group of travellers arrived on our island shore. They would have an even more long lasting impact. Christianity may have already reached our shores after the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312 AD but it had largely died out in these islands by 450.

In 596 there was another more successful attempt when Pope Gregory despatched a group of about 40 monks under the leadership of Augustine (later St Augustine) to convert the "heathens" in our island who he (the Pope) always referred to as the "Angli" (the English). The monks started by converting the ruling families of Kent and Wessex where the population was primarily Jutes, and Angles respectively.

The Augustinian mission eventually reached the midlands area in 655 AD. This area was becoming known as "Mercia" and was mainly peopled by the tribes known as Angles. They converted the ruler of the Mercians, who went by the wonderful name of Wulfhere.

To digress for a moment; the name "Mercia" is from the Anglo-Saxon word "Mierce" and it means "the land of the boundary people". There is a dispute between historians as to which boundary this refers to. Was it the northern boundary of their territory between the Mercian Anglo-Saxons and the Northumbrian Anglo-Saxons, or the western boundary between the Mercian Anglo-Saxons and the retreating Romano/Celtic/British people? The majority view is that the boundary refers to the latter group who occupied the belt of high land connecting the hills of Cannock Chase with the Forest of Arden. This is roughly the boundary between South Staffordshire and North Western Warwickshire today. It was the western boundary of Mercia in the seventh century. It was not until the 8th century that the area west of this zone, right up to the Welsh borders, was occupied by Anglo-Saxon settlers.

Despite the division of England at this time into several kingdoms such as Mercia, Northumberland, Wessex, Kent and Essex, there was only ever "one church" of the "gens Anglorum" (English people). The English church transcended the political boundaries of the time. It was able to convert the vast majority of the population of what we now call England quite quickly because it wasn't dependent on any one local ruler who might die from illness, in a battle, or be deposed, at any time. By prioritising the conversion of the rulers and people at the top of society the Church acquired land. Only rulers were able to grant endowments for the foundation of churches and monasteries. These were needed to educate and train the monks and nuns, who would go on to convert the rest of the population, which would, at that time, have been almost entirely illiterate.

The English Christian Church would eventually create its own individual identity (it venerated English and British saints) while closely following the Roman practices in liturgy and culture, which were confirmed at the "Synod of Whitby" in 664 AD. The Church would begin to civilise much of the country by educating young men to read and write. These "monks" would go out into the country to preach the Christian gospel and evangelise their local communities. Some of them would create astonishing works of art, and produce quantities of manuscripts and books full of figurative design. They and their books travelled all over what we now call Europe, spreading knowledge and education. Much of what we now know of life in Anglo-Saxon England comes from their books and records. The Venerable Bede from Northumbria being one of the most famous historical scribes of all time.

It is not known exactly when Christianity arrived in our area. From 655AD when he converted to Christianity, the Mercian ruler, Wulfhere gave much land for the creation of monasteries. We know that by 675 a double monastery (comprising monks and nuns) had been founded at Breedon-on-the-Hill (just over six miles north east of Packington). In addition there was also a double monastery at Repton by 697, and, at that date the foundations of a church (St. Wystans) were being laid out. This church at Repton would go on to play a significant role in the history of Mercia.

POSSIBLE ORIGINS OF PACKINGTON.

The first known "settlement" of the land on which we now live (as opposed to nomadic people passing through) probably began when an Anglo-Saxon man by the name of "Pacca", possibly the leader of an extended family unit, or small tribe, founded a "tun" (a farmstead, homestead, or settlement) almost certainly near the brook which runs alongside what is now Mill Street, and probably in the vicinity of our current church building, although, of course this would not be built until several hundred years later.

There are other Packingtons in our area, one adjacent to Coleshill in North Warwickshire, and one between Lichfield and Tamworth. The name "Pacca" may have been a common name related to an occupation like Smith, or Miller. Alternatively Pacca may have been a prominent leader in the wider area who founded several tuns. Pacca's followers, or indeed his wider family would have been known as "Paccingas" and so their original settlement might have been called "Paccingastun".

We have no record of when Pacca founded his tun here. It may have been as early as 650, or it may have been at any point up to about 800 AD.

In the period in question nearly all farming would be subsistence farming. The primary purpose was to sustain your family community. Markets would arrive later. Land would be cleared, as new immigrant families settled in new areas, with the most promising, well drained, land cultivated first.

Before the first settlement of Packington the land on which it now stands would have been heathland. There is evidence of Packington being originally called "Packington-on-the- Heath" (rather like "Normanton le Heath" today and, of course, "Heather" would have been heathland). This heathland would need clearing before farming crops could commence and so, the argument goes, it would only be cleared when the more fertile land around the area was already occupied.

There are, of course, other considerations when considering a successful site for habitation apart from the fertility of the soil. The most important of these, as stated previously, is close access to fresh drinking water.

Another is the sort of terrain on which animals can be grazed. It is noteworthy that the "Domesday Book", of 1086, which we will get to later, lists "woodland" as an agricultural asset.

The Domesday Book entry for Ashby de la Zouch which was owned by a Norman landowner, Hugh de Grandmesnil, records…… "(there is) woodland 1 league long and four furlongs broad for 100 pigs"... Woodland is also often referred to in the Domesday Book as "Woodland pasture" indicating its suitability for the grazing of animals.

New immigrants arriving from northern Europe were likely to be itinerant people, more than capable of living off the land initially, while they cleared their new land with the help of grazing animals, such as pigs, goats, and later cattle and sheep. There would be wild boar and red deer in the woodlands around Packington and plenty of wildfowl to hunt and snare. In addition nuts and berries would be available to harvest in the autumn. The Anglo-Saxon word for "autumn" (which is a later Norman French word) is appropriately "harvest". Any surfeit of meat from their hunting exploits could be exchanged with their near neighbours who were already growing crops, and vice- versa.

Imagine our new arrivals, possibly an extended family who had travelled in stages, across the North Sea, up the Humber estuary before travelling further westwards. Alternatively they may have been 2nd or 3rd generation residents of our islands seeking new unclaimed pastures further inland. Upon reaching our area they would be faced with travelling on up the Trent to where it became un-navigable, and then abandoning their boat and setting off on foot to the uncharted

areas further west to seize some land from the Celts in modern day Shropshire. Alternatively they could abandon ship at Repton, walk south for a few miles and set up camp by a fresh water stream and begin to enjoy a settled life, in a reasonably secure area, possibly for the first time in their lives.

Today the advantages of living in a small isolated self-contained community, away from the main cross country routes, would probably not include reducing the chances of being overrun by an invading army, or a marauding gang of armed men, or succumbing to a virulent infectious disease. In 7th century Mercia such events were not uncommon. The mortality rate amongst all sections of the population from infectious diseases was incredibly high in this period. The "Black Death" in the fourteenth century was only unique in its severity and the numbers succumbing to it.

It is reported that there was a violent outbreak of plague across the whole of England in 665, which may have lasted for several years. Certainly there is evidence that the Pope had to approve the appointment of many new Bishops in our island in quick succession indicating some major outbreak of infectious disease.

It is not surprising, given this background, that the idea of leading the solitary religious life as chosen by people who became hermits, often living by streams, or in wild remote places had quite an attraction in these times. The much later fictitious stories of Robin Hood, which almost certainly had some basis in fact, demonstrated that groups of people could and did live in woodland, even after they had been "outlawed". The "woodland" at this time would not have been dark gloomy coniferous forests (like those planted, until recently, by the Forestry Commission) but open woodland with clearings, a bit like the landscape you might encounter on a walk around the grounds of "Calke Abbey" today.

The concept of living freely in woodlands is endemic in much of the folklore of the Germanic/Scandinavian peoples. It carried on, admittedly mostly as myth, in England right up to the sixteenth century: for example, Shakespeare's "Forest of Arden" (this famous forest described in the play "As you like it", does actually exist and, incidentally, originally stretched from Stratford-on-Avon to Tamworth, and included the areas on which Coventry and Birmingham now stand).

Historians consider that human habitation of an area, in the Anglo-Saxon period, usually began with settlements by an extended family unit. Subsequently other settlers who were not blood relatives would have identified themselves with the group, by then dominant in the area and a tribal identity would eventually develop. As the "tribe" grew the idea of the land being owned by a tribe but controlled by a leader grew.

To ensure their further safety, the first residents of Packington would fairly quickly have become part of a group of settlements in the area, which would identify with a dominant local group, or tribe, and eventually owe allegiance to a leader of a group of settlements. Packington appears to have been in an area controlled by a large tribe called the "Tomsaete". The "Tomsaete" were based around the river Tame, a tributary of the Trent, in a territory that also included the settlement of Tamworth and which spread as far north as Breedon-on-the-Hill. .

MERCIA EMERGES

Eventually, around 600AD these tribes merged into the kingdom that would come to be known as "Central Mercia" which included the Trent Valley in Staffordshire and parts of South Derbyshire (including the area around Packington). Later still, as it expanded further, it would just be called "Mercia". By the year 700 Mercia had grown by conquest and assimilation to include most of the modern counties of Cheshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire,

Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, and parts of Berkshire. Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Local historians consider that Measham was founded in the mid- 7th century, and it is possible that a first settlement at Packington, may have followed shortly afterwards.

Mercia lost its first great ruler King Penda, killed by Northumbrian forces at the battle of "Winwaid" (near present day Leeds, in Yorkshire) in 655. Penda is famous for two main reasons. First he was the last pagan King of Mercia, and second, his descendants (or people who claimed to be his descendants) continued to rule Mercia until the last King of Mercia, Ceolwulf 2nd whose rule of the whole kingdom ended in 877. Packington was certainly established during the "Mercian" years even if we don't yet know exactly when the first settlement began.

It was probably following the death of King Penda at Winwaid that historians now believe that the world famous "Staffordshire Hoard " was buried less than twenty miles west of Packington at Hammerwich near Lichfield. This was on the moors between the territories of the "Tomsaete" and the "Pencersaete" tribes of Mercia.

These wonderfully designed pieces of golden weaponry ornamentation, and jewel encrusted saddle pommels, hand crafted, were wrought, with intricate and minute detail, by highly skilled people, and almost certainly "young" people with perfect eyesight. The Anglo-Saxons had come a long way from their first landings in East Anglia of pagan, nomadic, hired warriors from northern Europe.

Mercia would, by 750 AD, encompass all of what we now call the Midlands and southern England. Its capital was Tamworth and its major religious centres were Lichfield and Repton, all three within a day's walk of Packington. The residents of Mercia didn't only grow crops and rear animals. They carved beautiful statues (v Lichfield Cathedral). They created numerous beautifully decorated manuscripts and books (v the chained library in Hereford Cathedral). They built substantial stone Churches (v Brixworth in Northamptonshire and many others later pulled down by the Normans). They also mined coal, and lead. The Abbess of Repton is recorded as sending a coffin made from "Wirksworth" lead from Derbyshire to St. Guthlac in Lincolnshire in 714 AD.

In addition a Mercian charter, granted by King Aethelbald, dated around 716 exchanges areas of land at the Droitwich "Salt Works" indicating an industrial exploitation of salt which had begun under the Romans. The importance of salt cannot be overstated as a preserver of food, especially meat, right up until the invention of refrigeration. Nearly all place names ending in "Wich" or Wyche" such as Nantwich, (where there were early workings extracting salt) indicate the existence of salt production nearby, or in the case of the "Wyche Cutting" through the centre of the Malvern Hills a salt transportation route. More locally there are still a number of road names in Leicestershire which include the word "salt" in their title indicating the route taken in the local transportation of salt across the county.

King Aethelbald, mentioned above, the grandson of King Penda's younger brother Eowa, was one of the outstanding Kings of Mercia. He reigned for an astonishing 41 years, from 716 to 757. This was considerably more than the lifespan of most Packington residents at the time. During his reign the boundaries of Mercia expanded to include most of southern England. The historian Bede stated that "all of the provinces and kings south of the Humber were subject to him". A charter of 736, drawn up at Worcester, refers to Aethelbald as King of all the provinces called by the general name "South English" as well as Mercia, and at the bottom of the document he signs himself "rex Britanniae" (King of Britain).

In 1979 a piece of sculpture was unearthed at Repton. It is believed to represent Aethelbald. If this supposition is correct, it is the oldest known large scale representation of any English King. As well as being a strong, and probably cruel, warrior of renown, a more disreputable side of Aethelbald is indicated in a letter written to him by Boniface, later "Saint Boniface", the archbishop of Mainz in about 746AD. The letter is written in Latin, the pan-European language of the early Church. The letter while acknowledging Aethelbald's generosity in giving alms and his strong "prohibition of theft and iniquities, perjuries and rapine" then goes on to praise his role as a "defender of widows" and the poor and his maintenance of "firm peace" in his kingdom.

Finally comes the criticism: "you have, as many say, neither taken a lawful wife nor maintained chaste abstinence for God's sake, but, governed by lust, have stained the fame of your glory before God, and men, by the sin of lasciviousness and adultery".

If that wasn't enough the letter continues:-"what is worse, those who tell us this, add, that this shameful crime is especially committed in the monasteries with holy nuns and virgins consecrated to God. There is no doubt this is doubly a sin." Boniface then reaches the last and in his view the most serious crime… "Moreover, it has been told to us that you have violated many privileges of churches and monasteries, and have stolen from them certain revenues…he who steals or plunders the possessions of Christ and the Church will be adjudged to be a homicide in the sight of the just Judge"… "And it is said that your ealdormen and companions offer greater violence and oppression to monks and priests than other Christian Kings have done before."

Perhaps here we see an early indication of the struggle for power and wealth between the "Church" and the "State" in the form of the King (the "Church" would go on to acquire about a quarter of the land mass of England over the centuries while the monarch would retain about a fifth). This conflict reached a peak in the "Murder in the Cathedral" of Archbishop Thomas a Becket 424 years later at Canterbury in 1170, and would go on to play a part in King Henry's founding of a "protestant" church in the sixteenth century. It may even have been a factor in the Civil War of the seventeenth century.

Back to King Aethelbald. If that stinging letter referred to above wasn't bad enough for King Aethelbald, worse was to follow..

Most residents of Packington will be aware of a King of England who was "treacherously slain" in a field just over 10 miles (as the crow flies) from their front door. A clue. His remains were found in a car park in Leicester quite recently and he was subsequently buried in Leicester Cathedral.

How many know of another English King slain even nearer to their Packington front door. Yes it's true. Poor old King Aethelbald! He may have become unpopular after reigning all that time, or maybe the local nuns had had enough. The truth will never be known, but what is clear is that he was murdered by his "bodyguards" one night in 757 while riding back to Tamworth, probably from Repton. He died somewhere between "No Mans Heath" and Seckington just over eight miles south of Packington. He was later buried in the crypt at St Wystan's Church, Repton.

THE MERCIAN SUPREMACY

By the end of the eighth century the inhabitants of Packington would be in the centre of a flourishing kingdom which encompassed all of England's central regions. It included most of Yorkshire and Lancashire, and most of the south east including the important port known as London. The capital of Mercia was Tamworth. Its religious centre was Lichfield. For a short time, in the 790s, Lichfield became an Archbishopric rivalling Canterbury and York. As stated

previously Packington was only a day's walk from two of the most important conurbations in the western civilised world at that time.

In the reign of King Offa, 757-796, the Kingdom of Mercia would trade with the empire of the mighty Charlemagne who controlled much of Europe. In the last year of Offa's reign (796), Offa and Charlemagne "drew up the first commercial treaty in English history".

Offa and Charlemagne corresponded with each other on equal terms. In one of his letters to Offa, Charlemagne complains about the inadequate size of the latest "English cloak" he has acquired. Apparently Frisian weavers of English wool had been selling "miserable little cloaks" at the same price as the previous longer ones. The mention of English wool is the first indication of the importance of English sheep. English wool would become the mainstay of English exports for the next few hundred years.

To help trade with the wider world it is known that King Offa upgraded his coinage to meet a specification acceptable to the Franks, and Charlemagne. In addition a gold coin has been discovered, struck in 774 by the Caliph Al-Mansur, which imitates an Arabic dinar, but carries the words "Offa Rex" in Roman capitals across the reverse. There must have been enough trade between Offa's England and the Arabian Caliphate to justify the manufacture of a specific coinage. It's hard to believe that sheep reared in Packington in the 780s may have been providing woollen garments for Arabian Caliphs, to keep them warm during those cold "Arabian nights".

Before we leave the Anglo Saxons and move on, it might be worth asking, Apart from the founding of Packington, how else have we personally benefited from the arrival of the Anglo Saxons?

Communication and **Government** are the two most obvious answers. Every time we speak we use words we have inherited from our Germanic ancestors. 70% of our language is made up of words derived from the Anglo-Saxons, including most of the days of our week which are named after their pagan gods.

When we think of Anglo-Saxon, we think of simple, slightly "uncouth"(a Saxon word) words, such as Ale, beer, canny, croft, daft, earful, freak, gaffer, hangdog, iron, jeer, kick, lying, mate, nose, old, pig, quick, reckless, strong, and thieve. They also gave us more empathetic words, such as: aware, bliss, care, darling, endear, farewell, glum, hearken, itch, kindred, likeable, mellow, nestle, overcome, read, sad, thankfulness, and understand.

The way we govern ourselves includes assemblies of representatives. Across the Germanic and Scandinavian world there were "Things". A "Thing" was a governing assembly made up of the free people of the local community presided over by "lawspeakers". These gatherings usually took place on top of a hill away from centres of population.

A local Thing assembly point occurs a mile or so south west of Packington. To get there, walk down Babelake Street from Measham Road and shortly take the footpath on the right across the field to Normandy Wood. Continue up across Packington Wood. and follow the footpath sloping uphill across a couple more fields. You will eventually cross the entrance road to Springs Health Spa. At the point where you reach the road numbered B4116 (called Gallows Lane) is where the "Measham Enclosure" map in Measham museum shows 3 fields marked "Thing". One on the Spa side of the road and two on the Measham side of the road. They are the highest point (130 metres - 420 feet - above sea level) between Packington, Measham and Ashby. If you walk there from Packington you will have followed in the footsteps of our forefathers on their way to take part in their local government duties.

Attendance was limited to “Freemen” who surrendered their weapons on arrival. If proposals put forward by the leaders at these Thing gatherings were approved, attendees, upon retrieval of their weapons at the end, waved and brandished their weapons in the air. A sort of early local Council meeting but a little less dignified! It all sounds like a distant world but if you consider the behaviour of our modern MPs waving their order papers above their heads to signify their approval, in our current Parliament, you may think we haven’t progressed very far. The modern English term “hustings” much bandied about recently comes directly from this source word Thing.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE VIKINGS

In the second half of the ninth century everything changed for the Anglo Saxon farmers, and homesteaders of Packington. For many years the, still pagan, Vikings from Scandinavia had sent raiding parties across the North Sea to attack and plunder the riches stored in Anglo Saxon religious establishments, primarily monasteries. The first raid noted in the “Anglo- Saxon Chronicles” was on Lindisfarne in 793. Many more followed which may have involved scores of Viking ships. They laid waste to large parts of what we now call Eastern England. They came on raids in what were called “Long-ships”. They sailed up navigable English rivers such as the River Trent, robbed and pillaged the locals, set fire to what they couldn’t carry away, and then sailed away with their ill-gotten gains.

In 867 AD things worsened. A huge fleet of Norsemen (and women) comprising several hundred ships, landed in East Anglia, and then headed north and captured York. More arrived and spread out. In 873 everything changed again. The Vikings came up the Trent as far as Repton, about half a day’s walk from Packington. This was a different invasion to the “hit and run” raids of previous years. These people intended to stay. Sadly for many of them, they didn’t stay alive long. The skeletal remains of at least 250 young Viking men and women were discovered, some years ago, near to Repton Church, by the side of the river, where the Viking army had wintered in 873/4. In addition, only 8 miles north of Packington, in “Heath Wood” near Ingleby, archaeologists discovered, a few years ago, 59 barrows on a hillside overlooking the River Tren

These contained the remains of the only known Scandinavian “crematorium” in the British Isles. This was indeed the war cemetery of the leaders of the “Great Heathen Army” as they were described in the Anglo- Saxon Chronicles, a short walk away from our village.

Packington would have been overrun by the Vikings early in their invasion. Records show that “in the Harvest season of 877 the” (Viking) “army went away into Mercia and shared out some of it”. The annals record free-born Danish soldiers settling as farmers, dependent on the Viking Army bases established in the main towns of Lincoln, Derby, Nottingham, Leicester, and Stamford. This area later became known as the “Land of Five Boroughs”. The areas controlled by these “Five Boroughs” would later result in the creation of the counties which currently surround Packington. This later shire system was established in the early tenth century. It is probable that Packington fell just inside the area protected by the Viking garrison in Leicester.

The Saxons were driven back as far as the south west of England. The Saxon King Alfred, fought back. Eventually he won a major victory at Edington in 878. By the resulting treaty (The Treaty of Chippenham) the Saxons and the Danish Vikings split England into two. The Danes kept the “North” and “East” (known as The Danelaw) and the Saxons ruled the “South” and “West.” The Treaty boundary roughly follows the current A5, although in our area the boundary appears to run to the north east of the A5, from the east side of Lichfield probably following the river Mease to Clifton Campville, and then almost to Measham before heading back south

towards Atherstone on the south side of Tamworth. The boundary probably followed natural features such as rivers or streams.

THE DANELAW AND ITS IMPACT

A quick look at a map of Scandinavian place names in England might suggest that there was a mass settlement of Danes in the eastern half of England in the ninth century. It has been pointed out however that in the East Midlands, only in the Wreake valley, which lies between Melton Mowbray and Leicester, and in small areas of Lincolnshire, do Scandinavian place-names usually ending in "BY" or "THORPE" comprise half or more of the total settlements. There is little to suggest that the Vikings made any real impression on settlement patterns. Most Scandinavian place-names probably represent the renaming of existing settlements after the Viking invaders had chased the Saxons out.

Probably Packington was too small to even bother with a new name. Possibly the remaining villagers were driven out, or some of them may have stayed put and reluctantly put up with their new Viking neighbours. Those that stayed would have had to learn to communicate with the new arrivals, and be absorbed into the Danish "Danelaw". The attraction of the ever flowing "Gilwiskaw" brook (possibly a Danish name) probably ensured continued occupation of the site by one group or another throughout this troubled century. We know from the current names of villages in our area that some villages ended up with what historians call "hybrid names", where an English name ending in tun has had a Scandinavian personal name attached to it. Example of this are Grimston and Snibston. There are over 60 more in the area around Packington and the Wreake Valley.

What happened to Packington after the arrival of the Vikings? It has been stated by local historians that Packington may have had a wooden church presumed to have been on the same site as the existing church. Many Viking warriors were eventually converted to Christianity. The original church, if there was one, may have survived their arrival. The evidence from Repton is that the pagan Viking warriors, who died there in 873, were buried in consecrated ground near the original Saxon church which implies the pagan Vikings had some level of belief in the Christian religion.

The still existing crypt at St. Wystans Church in Repton dates from the pre-Viking, mid Saxon era. It was not destroyed when the Vikings arrived, although probably all of the valuables within were removed.

What impact did the Vikings have on the previously Anglo-Saxon population? Have we, the modern residents of Packington, retained anything from the Viking occupation of our village? The question can be answered again with a "yes". As with the Saxons they supplied us with many words we use on a daily basis.

As stated previously, 70% of the words we use when we speak English come from Anglo Saxon roots. That leaves 30% split between various languages from Greek through Latin and French to Hindu. Not much left for words from "Ancient Norse" then, but, if you consider the following, some of them rather frightening or violent words:

"Anger, awe, awkward, berserk, bleak, blunder, club, die, ill, knife, mistake, muck, ransack, rotten, rugged, scare, scrape, shake, sick, skin, skull, slaughter, stagger, thrust, ugly, want, weak, and wrong", you might guess that these are all words we have inherited from the warrior Vikings, and you would be right!

They did also leave us: "birth, bug, bull, bylaw, cake, dregs, fog, freckle, gift, give, glove, happy, husband, lad, leg, likely, law, loan, loft, mug, odd, sale, score, seem, skip, sprint, tight,

troll, window", and many more, and of course, very importantly, the word PLOUGH which we will come to later.

The Danelaw didn't last for more than a couple of generations initially, but the division of the country along the same boundary occurred again in the early eleventh century when two Danish princes divided the country again for a few years before it was finally re-united permanently. It is debateable how fixed the boundary was that divided the two distinct "civilisations and how much trade took place between the two factions. Sometime after the year 937, the whole of what we now call England became unified, for the first time since the Romans left us in the 5th century.

PACKINGTON IN THE CENTRE OF ENGLAND.

The first true "all English" King was Athelstan. He was a grandson (perhaps not legitimate) of King Alfred "the Great". Originally from Wessex he was brought up at Tamworth by his Aunt Aethelflaed. She was known as "The Lady of the Mercians". Crowned in 924 Athelstan and his Anglo- Saxon army beat the combined Viking armies from the North, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, at the battle of "Brunanburgh" in 937. No-one has yet confirmed the site of this battle but the best guesses are Bromborough on the Wirral, Cheshire, or, more unlikely, a site near Doncaster in Yorkshire. Brunanburgh gave Aethelstan control of the Saxon Kingdom in the south and the Danelaw area in the north. Packington became part of England again.

Following this battle Packington at last became a relatively peaceful village, no longer a frontier village, but in the heart of the new country of England. Packington probably remained bilingual in the new Saxon/Danish Kingdom, with its residents trying to resume a quiet rural life under their new Saxon King who had been the first ceremonially crowned English King at, unsurprisingly …. Kings "tun" (Kingston) on Thames" of course. Remnants of Athelstan's stronghold there can still be seen, a short walk from the modern shopping centre.

In this period England became one of the richest countries in Europe. "English" Monks and Scholars travelled around Europe, conversing in Latin, producing books and manuscripts of scripture. For a generation or two the residents of Packington had peace and relative prosperity. It wasn't to last.

PACKINGTON UNDER SCANDINAVIAN RULE

In 1013 Sweyn Forkbeard, the King of Denmark and Norway, invaded England and defeated the Saxon King Ethelred (the "unready"). Sweyn became King of all three countries, and Packington became ruled by a Scandinavian King. In 1014 Sweyn died, and Ethelred was reinstated. Ethelred died in 1016 leaving his son Edmund Ironside as King. Sweyn's son Cnut, already King of Denmark and Norway, invaded England and occupied the northern half of England. Later that same year Edmund Ironside died and Cnut became King of all England as well as continuing to rule Denmark and Norway. A year later he also became King of Scotland. You can imagine residents of Packington at the time having difficulty keeping up with all this and greeting visitors trying to update them with, "Who did you say was King? ... "Never heard of him"! Where's he from? .... Where's that? .... Never heard of it! Over the water you say? What's he doing there?"

Cnut ruled until 1035 when he died and his son Harold Harefoot took over. Harold shared half of England with his half-brother Harthacnut ruling the other half. The boundary was once again the old Danelaw boundary until 1040 when Harthacnut died. By 1042 they were both dead and finally Edward the Confessor, a Saxon descendant of the house of Wessex took over and ruled all England until that famous year 1066.

PACKINGTON IN HISTORICAL RECORDS – 1043 and 1086

During Edward the Confessor's reign, a period of relative calm, we have the first written confirmation of the existence of our village of Packington. It occurs in the first year of the new King's reign, in a document dated 1043. This document states: As part of the "endowment of the new Priory of St Mary at Bablake in Coventry, Leofric, Earl of Mercia and his wife Godiva (yes, that "Lady Godiva"!), granted to the newly founded Priory, the Lordship of the Manor of Packington and the ecclesiastical rights of appointment or advowson" (it seems as though several other manors in Leicestershire were included in this particular endowment among them, Burbage, Barwell, and Scraptoft). What this all meant in real terms was that St Mary's Priory was charged with appointing the local priest in Packington. In return for this onerous responsibility the new Priory in Coventry collected the rents, tithes and other payments due every year, from these various Manors listed in Leicestershire, to be used for the upkeep of the Priory in Coventry.

To be fair to the monks they didn't just collect the tithes. They were almost certainly responsible for the installation of the mill in Packington. The monks would be among the most educated, intelligent and skilled craftsmen of their day. They were the equivalent of the high tech entrepreneurs of the computer world today. The mill leat - from the A42 to the break and then the dry section is almost certainly man-made and would have been lined with clay at the base (just like the canals built seven hundred years later). The monks would have worked out that if they ran the brook on the side of the small valley there they would have enough of a drop in height from where it met the hill at Packington to produce the power to run a mill. The construction of the mill would have considerably increased the income from their endowment.

It has also to be noted that medieval records indicate, that among the poor, exploited majority of the population, the least popular landlords, were not the Norman barons, but "monks". The monasteries were efficient and impersonal exploiters, with written records, long memories, and clear consciences, and, as Bob Dylan was later to put it "They had God on their side".

NORMAN PACKINGTON

In 1066, William the Conqueror arrived here in England, and won a rather famous battle at "Battle" near Hastings, with his Norman Army. As the victor, William, the new Monarch, owned all the land. He could decide to give land to, or take it away from, his supporters' or anyone else he chose. Technically in English law this is still the case. We as subjects are allowed to hold land free from encumbrances (freehold), or we can lease it, but in theory it still all belongs to the Monarch.

King William wanted quick control. The best way to achieve this was to parcel out land to his supporters. This is what he did to such effect that, within twenty years of his arrival, England was an entirely different country. Virtually all the land was owned by Normans.

Eventually he realised that not all his compatriots were paying him their fair share of the taxes so he set up what we would call a Royal Commission to go round the country and assess all the land that was under cultivation, who owned it, and how much it was worth. This record is what we now call "Domesday Book". It is unique and had no real contemporary equivalent anywhere in the world. This measurement of cultivated land was how William established how much tax he could collect. There was no census then. He had no idea of the size of his territories, or of the population he ruled. People could move about but "cultivated land" stayed put.

Taxing productive land was the one sure way to raise money. It was estimated that one Saxon "hide" (the word "Hide" relates to a family homestead and was roughly the area of farm land

required to sustain a Saxon family) produced about £1 worth of crops every year, so the "hide" was probably a slightly variable land measurement across the country, a smaller size in the fertile south, more in the north where there was less intense cultivation.

The Saxons had already hit on this idea of this early form of "Income tax". They had raised money from the lands in their areas to pay to the Danish in the "Danelaw" north to stop them invading the richer Saxon lands in the south. It was called the "Danegeld". The Saxons collected two shillings for every "hide" of cultivated land in their areas (about 20%) and handed most of it over to the Danes.

As a money raising venture it worked well, but it wasn't a total success in keeping out the Danes. The Danes liked the idea of "Danegeld". After they received their first payment they kept threatening to invade Saxon areas again unless more money was paid to them. The Saxons had to keep stumping up. The extra wealth flowing into Danish areas once it had been dispersed in the form of coinage would have caused a rapid increase in prices, or what we now know as "inflation".

"Economics" hadn't been invented then but once money in the form of coinage had been invented, as a means of exchange then inflation and its twin deflation would have been all too common. It is clear from the recent finds of large quantities of buried coins, and gold, in our area that the rapid creation of money at short notice, was something at which our pre-Norman ancestors were very adept. In addition the "debasement" of the coinage wasn't invented by King Henry V111 (as I was taught at School). King Aethelbald of Mercia had reduced the amount of silver going into his silver coins, when temporarily short of silver, several hundred years earlier. Perhaps that was another reason for his demise at Seckington in 757!

When William the Conqueror arrived in England in 1066 he extended the Anglo Saxon taxing model to the whole of England, to Saxons and Danes alike.

Having a cash crisis in 1084, William levied a very heavy "geld" of 6 shillings on each "hide" or "carucate". (A carucate was a Danish measurement of land and equalled the extent of land which could be made tillable (ploughed) in a season by a team of 8 oxen. It worked out in practice as not dissimilar to a Saxon "hide"). The "geld" was like an "all in one" combination of Council tax, VAT, and income tax amounting to about 30% of your notional annual income. Manageable in a good year when your crops flourished, but much more severe when the weather was bad, crops failed, and you still had to pay the tax on a notional yield that hadn't been achieved. No "food banks" then, just "poaching" wildlife in the woods, and eating plants from the hedgerows to prevent starvation. Of course the woods and the hedgerows and all the creatures living in them were now all technically owned by the King.

Horrendous penalties were handed out to those caught poaching animals in the Kings forests. Mutilation and death were common, but were probably risked if the only alternative was dying from starvation. (For more information on poaching see "The adventures of Robin Hood", and note that the verb to "poach" is probably from the Norman French word "Pocher", "to enclose in a bag", as is the verb "to pocket").

There is only one word to describe the Normans who with a fairly small army (about 8,000 men) conquered England by winning one battle. The word is "formidable" and they brought it with them. Within twenty years of their arrival they had built several hundred impregnable castles each within a comfortable days riding distance of another. Only one of these castles was ever captured and destroyed (the temporary structure at York in 1069, in the rebellion which led to the "harrying of the north"). Only much later with the arrival of gunpowder and explosives did these castles succumb. The land of England was shared out between the Norman victors. By the

time of the Domesday Book in 1086 they owned or controlled all the agricultural land in the country. The descendants of those surviving boatloads of Normans (of whom it is estimated about 5,500 survived the fighting) who arrived on that fateful Saturday October 14th 1066 would feature heavily in our future history

Let's just consider one of them who set sail with William the Conqueror in 1066:-

If you have ever eaten at the only Pub in Lount, "The Ferrers Arms" or visited Staunton Harold you will be familiar with the name of my chosen family. Henri de Ferrers was the eldest son of Walklin de Ferrers. In about 1040 he inherited his father's land, a few acres centred on the small village of Ferrieres-Saint-Hilaire (which, in the last French census in 2008, had a population of 396, about half the size of Packington).

In England, after accompanying William across the Channel and taking part in the triumph at Hastings, he became a leading magnate serving King William. He began to progressively acquire landholdings. Initially he was granted the lands of "Goderich" the former Sherriff of Berkshire in Buckinghamshire, Essex, and Northamptonshire. After the 1071 revolt which King William quickly put down, Henry de Ferrers was awarded land in Derbyshire, Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire and Warwickshire as well as further lands in Berkshire and Essex. He also became holder of the "Wapentake" of Appletree centred on Tutbury Castle now in Staffordshire which had land stretching from Derbyshire, to Leicestershire and Staffordshire. Among his tenants were members of families believed to have come from villages near his original home in France. The Curzons from Notre-Dame-de-Courson, the Baskervilles from Saint- Martin-de–Boscherville, and the Levetts from Jonqueret-de-Livet.

In the Domesday Book drawn up only twenty years after the battle of Hastings. Henry de Ferrers is recorded as being one of the royal commissioners in charge of the Domesday survey so we can assume he took a keen interest in recording all the land he held including by then over 100 villages in Derbyshire. His Leicestershire holdings comprised nearly all the land in the following villages: Stapleford, Tonge, Worthington, Shepshed, Saxby, Coston, Edmonthorpe, Seagrave, Wyfordby, Orton on the Hill, Twycross, Gopsall, Sheepy Magna, Congerstone, Smockington, Shenton, Houghton on the Hill, Ashby Folville, Coleorton, Netherseal, Overseal, Boothorpe, Appleby Parva, Swepstone, Woodcote, Newton Burgoland, Osgathorpe, Stretton en le Field, Donisthorpe, Burton Lazars, Windesers, Somerby, Little Dalby, Burrough on The Hill, Newbold, and Linton.

Henry's direct descendants would go on to take a prominent part in Simon de Montfort's efforts to establish a Parliament in the thirteenth century. One of the de Ferrers would be killed alongside his King at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. They would marry into all the prominent families in England including the "Devereux" family (d' Evreux, in Normandy) which later included Queen Elizabeth's favourite, the notorious Earl of Essex. Despite one leading member of the de Ferrers family being condemned to death for the murder of one of his employees, they still have descendants in the House of Lords, and still own considerable tracts of land most of which they have held since before "Domesday"

PACKINGTON IN THE DOMESDAY BOOK

William had calculated that if he could collect 6 shillings for every hide or carucate in the country he could live, back in France, in his customary style. His tax didn't raise as much money in 1084 as William had anticipated. (It may be that the English have always been good at tax avoidance schemes) because later in 1085/6 William set up a land census which we now call "Domesday Book". For many it was considered as the "day of judgement". It did spell "doom"

for a lot of "just about managing" northern and midland farmers. By 1084, as previously stated, virtually all productive land in England was owned by Normans.

Hugh de Grandmesnil was one of only twelve Norman knights identified as being on the Bayeux tapestry, and therefore definitely at the Battle of Hastings. He was granted 100 villages in Leicestershire for his trouble. One of these villages was Ashby de la Zouch. Most of these Normans were absentee landlords who hardly ever set foot in England leaving the management of their property to French underlings who extorted what they could from the local people. Hugh was an exception in one way in that on one of his very infrequent visits to Leicestershire he died. According to a contemporary report his body was preserved in salt and then sewn up into the hide of an ox. It was transported in this state to the valley of the Ouche by two monks. This was where his family came from, and where he was finally interred in the Abbey at St Evroult. A lot of the "Norman Conquerors" including William himself are buried in Normandy, or other parts of France, and these include many subsequent Norman Kings.

After the Vikings arrived in Northern France (Normandy, from "Norsemen") in the 800s, our future Norman rulers had subsequently learned French which they carried on speaking in England for the next 350 years (when they were in England, which wasn't very often). Royalty spoke French, The Church spoke in Latin, everyone else managed with a combination of Anglo Saxon and Danish and a smattering of Welsh. This "People's" language was later called, English. To illustrate the divide between the rulers and the ruled: consider the following facts.

Firstly, King Henry V wrote a letter in English after his victory at Agincourt in 1415. This is 349 years after the battle of Hastings in 1066. It was the first known communication in English by an "English" monarch since William the Conqueror gave up learning English in 1069.

Secondly, King Richard 111, shortly before his demise at Bosworth, (or thereabouts!) allowed all new laws to be translated into English in 1483! This was 417 years after 1066. It was a nice, if belated, political gesture but, since very few people could read, it probably didn't make a huge amount of difference to the plight of residents of Packington who "fell foul" of the law.

Back to King William and the Domesday Book. This amazing document confirms that Packington had been part of the Danelaw as it gives the measurement of land in our area in carucates rather than hides. It also states that Packington was in the "Wapentake of Goscote". The Danish areas were divided into "Wapentakes". Some historians think this word refers to divisions of land made at the "Thing" gatherings mentioned previously. "Wapen" or weapon is where this name apparently comes from.

If you examine the facts, recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, (which recorded every moving thing including ploughs which I'll get to in a minute) you will discover that there were a lot of freemen and far less "servi" or slaves listed in the Danelaw areas in the north.

By contrast in the southern Saxon areas there were 28,235 slaves listed out of an estimated total countrywide, rural population of about 300,000 in the whole of England. Given that adult males made up about one fifth of the total population and there were few slaves in the north, a significant percentage of Saxons must have been slaves.

Although in my schooldays, and during my childhood reading I was always given the impression that the Saxons were the "good guys" and the Vikings and the Normans were the "bad guys" (I am thinking of the stories of "Hereward the Wake" and "Ivanhoe" here) I think, on reflection, I am happy to live in Packington in what was part of the "Danelaw" since I discovered the lack of "freemen" in the Anglo-Saxon south. By contrast to the slaves in the south there were 23,324 "sokemen" (more commonly spelt "sochmen") in the Danish north, mostly in Lincolnshire,

Norfolk and Suffolk, but also clearly, as we will discover, in Leicestershire. “Sochmen” were freemen, and were usually paid money for their labour, and, importantly, allowed to own land.

According to the Domesday Book, 5 of these “sochmen” lived in Packington. The five Packington “sochmen” owned 3 ploughs between them. Ownership of a plough clearly conferred status, and the number of ploughs in a community would give an indication of the size of the local population.

In 1086 Packington also had, listed in the “Desmesne” of Packington, (“Desmesne” means “belonging to the “Manor”)…. “1 plough and 3 Villeins and a priest”. (“Villeins” were bonded peasants who payed labour service to the Lord of the Manor but were allowed a share of common fields to graze animals on, and, in some cases, grow crops on (think: Very large Allotments). There are still many “commons” as they are now known, currently registered, in England.

To make up its total population in 1086, Packington had one “Bordar” (defined as an “unfree smallholder” who usually had commitments to the “Lord of the Manor” or paid tithes to the Church).

The priest also had responsibility for appointing a chaplain to take services at Snibston. If we add it all up we get the adult male population of Packington as: 5 Sochmen, 3 Villeins, 1 Bordar, and 1 Priest = 10 adult males. Medieval scholars estimate a multiplier of between 4 and 5 to include their families and calculate the total population. This gives the resident population of Packington as between 37 and 46 in 1086 (assuming the priest was celibate! Up to fifty if he wasn’t!!).

Finally the Domesday Book also listed under the entry for Packington….a “Mill” with a value of a shilling and 3 acres of “meadow”. Assuming that the then wooden Church, if there was one, was located on the same site at the bottom of “Mill Street” where it currently stands, Packington would probably have stretched along the brook from the Church to the Mill, with the “meadows” quoted probably being around the “flood plain” of the brook. Two or three farms on either side of the brook would have made up the remainder of the village.

AN EARLY HISTORY OF MEASUREMENTS

As mentioned above, listed in the Domesday Book entry for Packington are 4 ploughs. The reference to ploughs gives us the chance to consider another aspect of medieval life in Packington, and the author of this dissertation to resurrect his early experiences at school.

How did the early residents of Packington measure things? When I was at secondary school, shortly after the end of the medieval period (it seems like it now), we learned “imperial measurements”.

These included inches, feet, and yards. 12 inches in a foot, three feet in a yard, 22 yards equalled a “chain”. A “chain” was the equivalent of 4 rods, making a rod 5 and a half yards. 40 rods, or ten chains, equalled a furlong, making a furlong 220 yards. Eight furlongs was the equivalent of a mile. A mile had 1,760 yards to it, but the word mile comes from the Latin for a thousand. I was taught that a mile was called a mile because it represented a thousand paces as marched by the Roman Army. I concluded that the Romans must have had very long legs, or perhaps they couldn’t count!

Who thought these numbers up? I remember thinking this, when I struggled with my maths at school in 1954. It got worse. An acre was 4,840 square yards!! Try working out the square root of 4,840. It is not 70X70 yards but 69.5701085237 yards squared. How could the Anglo- Saxons

work this out? Not even the most mathematically gifted Anglo- Saxons could work that out in their heads. Only the monasteries had pens and paper before 800 AD, and anyway, very few Anglo- Saxons could write! There must be another reason for these strange measurements!

There is. Once you know the code for these seemingly random numbers it all becomes clear. First of all you need to know that measurements in those days were not always uniform. How could they be when the word "yard" comes from the Saxon word "geard." This word "geard" meant, among other things, "a garden or enclosure", but it is also the word for a man's belt. What qualities do a belt and a garden share? I asked myself.

Of course, I thought, another word for a garden or an enclosure is a yard, as in backyard. A belt also encloses. If you then consider that the word "girdle" which also comes from the Saxon word "geard" has a similar purpose to a belt, both enclose the body. You can begin to see the link between the various words derived from "geard". You don't have to assess many men before you conclude that not all men's belts can be the same size. 36 inches is about the average waist size these days so clearly the average belt length is rather larger than a "yard" today. Early Saxon men must have been considerably slimmer in the pre "Big-Mac" era.

Incidentally, just to confuse things further a yard only became a fixed measurement in the twelfth century, when King Henry 1st fixed it as the distance from his nose to the thumb of his outstretched arm. Try it! I did, and decided that I must share almost the same length of arm as King Henry.

Of course you can't easily measure very long distances with your belt so something larger was required for measuring land. Imagine you are a Saxon farmer and it's "that time of the year" to start ploughing. You collect your ox (or team of oxen if you are a middle class "villein" (sometimes spelt "villan"). You know, as an Anglo-Saxon farmer with years of previous experience that your oxen can, on average, plough quite a long distance, or furrow, before they need a rest. You also know it is very difficult to turn a team of oxen around so it's best to keep going until they stop. When they reach the end of their "tether" and stop, you think to yourself, I'll measure that with my belt!!

It turns out to be 220 belt lengths. You decide to call that measurement (220 belt lengths) "The length of your furrow". This is a bit of a mouthful so it soon becomes a "furrow long" and eventually a "furlong". Over a period of time it became an accepted fact, that one average man, with an average team of oxen, could plough about 22 furrows of 220 yards long in a day. Each furrow would be about one "belt" or "yard" wide. That area or square yardage, 22 X 220 yards (if you haven't already guessed) equals 4,840 square yards. It was given the title of an "acre". The Saxons didn't need calculators after all, just a belt.

Of course it's much easier to keep the plough in a straight line if you have an assistant, or "Borderer" or even one of your children (no school in those days) to prod the oxen with a long pole when they start to "wander from the straight and narrow". After several seasons of ploughing you realise that if you standardise the lengths of these rods or poles to five and a half yards, you can use the rod to measure the width of five furrows with a bit left over at either end for someone to hold each end of the "rod". It becomes a quarter of the length of your "chain" (which is possibly used to fasten the oxen to the plough. Nobody seems to know where a "chain" measurement originally came from) you don't have to disconnect it from the oxen and the plough to measure the width of the 22 strips of land you have ploughed, you can just measure out 4 rod (or pole) lengths instead which happens to be how many rods you might need to point a team of eight oxen in a reasonably straight line.

As I learned in school all those years ago: 1 chain = 4 rods, or poles. This "chain" length measurement was so useful that it was used (and still is) to determine exactly the distance between the two wickets when we decided to start playing cricket several hundred years later on.

It was also used by the Ordnance Survey in the form of a chain to survey the United Kingdom when it first started producing maps in the eighteenth century.

Many more medieval measurements came about by the multiplication of the basic unit of a belt, sorry yard, e.g. An "Oxgang" was the amount of land tillable by one ox in a ploughing season, equivalent to about 15 acres or 72,600 square yards. A "Virgate" was land tillable by 2 oxen in a season, so about 30 acres. In parts of Yorkshire, even today, they call their fields by names which denote how many days they took to plough. "Six day field" or "twelve day field" etc.

The hamlet of Packington (maybe including as far as Snibston) was listed in the Domesday Book as having eight and a half carucates of cultivated land which in today's money is about 1,020 acres. It appears from the Domesday Book that there were, as we have seen 9 men and a priest in Packington. If we discount the priest we are left with 9 men with family support looking after almost a "carucate" each, according to the Domesday Book. This appears about average for Leicestershire.

SUMMARY - Packington: Early History - BC to 11th Century

We may see our village as always being a quiet oasis in a turbulent outside world, but it is clear that this hasn't always been the case. Life for the early residents of Packington could be bewildering, dangerous, and fraught. In contrast it could also be very lonely. The population of England during the Roman occupation was probably about 4 to 5 million. By the time Packington was founded it had dropped to less than 2 million. At the time of the Domesday Book in 1086 it was estimated to be about 2 million. To put it into perspective: at the time of Domesday Book London has been estimated to have had a population of about 10,000, York about 6,000 and the next largest cities were Norwich, and Lincoln with between 4,000 to 5,000 each. By contrast, in the 2011 census, Ashby de la Zouch recorded a population of 12,370. Early Anglo-Saxons would have been utterly bewildered by the size and the population of present day Ashby, never mind Leicester.

Most people had little communication with more than the twenty or thirty people who made up their local village or town. The towns which were granted the right, by the Monarch, to hold a market were the only places where there would be much social contact. Most people would spend their lives toiling in the fields in all the seasons and weathers, on their own, or in their family group during the hours of daylight. On Sundays they might meet neighbours when they met up for Church.

Another factor in looking at life in the early days of Packington is to consider the average age of the population. In 2011 the census showed that the median average age of the U.K. was 38. In the 14th century (the first period we have reliable figures for) the median age is 21. This means that in the period when Packington was founded the median age would have certainly been lower, probably in the high teens. People aged over 40 would have been very few.

This preponderance of very young people during this period, historians conjecture, may account for some of the extreme violence recorded. Strong family bonds, a close knit tribal community, and the absence of social skills deriving from an isolated existence may also have been a factor. There is a pervading melancholy in what has been preserved of Anglo-Saxon poetry which may reflect the sense of isolation and loneliness of people living in small contained communities doing repetitive solo work.

By the time King William “The Conqueror” arrived in 1066, the area in, and around, Packington had already been occupied by at least five different sets of invaders/immigrants. Firstly the Bronze Age people, then Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, and finally the Normans. The original Saxon settlement of Pacca had been overrun at least twice by the Vikings and the Normans in its first three hundred years. The place was full of “foreigners” from all over Europe.

LANGUAGE

Somehow they managed to get along together and learn each other’s languages. The language that is now called “English” grew, mainly from a Germanic dialect with a limited vocabulary, to a composite language, from many sources, with an enormous vocabulary.

One of the little known tipping points in the development of our language came when parts of the north of England rose up in revolt against William’s harsh rule in 1069. York was taken and the Norman garrison there slaughtered. William’s response was immediate, brutal, and decisive. He bought off the Danish forces invited over by the northern Saxon nobility, and then conducted what later became known as the “Harrying of the North".

Areas all across the North, which included Derbyshire and Shropshire, (but not fortunately for the inhabitants of Packington, Leicestershire) were laid waste, their crops destroyed, their houses burned down, and their inhabitants slaughtered. It took several generations before some parts of Cumberland and Northumberland began to be repopulated. They are not included in the Domesday Book fifteen years later because they were considered to have no value.

William himself abruptly gave up learning English in 1069. No further Royal proclamations were issued in English for several hundred years after 1070. William returned to France and spent most of the rest of his reign in Normandy (as did many of his successors).

The result was that in England everything spiritual continued to be written and spoken in Latin. Everything legal was spoken and written in French or Latin. In addition, for verbal communication, we had two separate languages spoken.

Sir Walter Scott was the first to point out how most of the food we eat is called by its Anglo-Saxon name while alive in the fields but, when it is served at the dining table, it becomes Norman French. So we have: Cow/Ox = Beef. Calf = Veal, Swine/Pig = Pork, Sheep = Mutton, Hen/Chicken = Poultry, Deer/Hart = Venison, Dove= Pigeon. This shows who was doing the rearing, and who was doing the eating!

A further comparison of Saxon and Norman words is in the table below. It demonstrates the added nuance an extra Norman French word (NF) has given us when integrated into our primarily Anglo-Saxon (AS) language. English can produce subtle shades of meaning which most other single-source languages lack: the Norman French is usually in more polite use.

AS	NF		AS	NF		AS	NF
smell, stench	odour		uncouth	rude		hearty	cordial
inn	tavern		leave	depart		hunt	chase
belly	stomach		kingship	monarchy		thorough	exhaustive
brittle	fragile		fair	beautiful		awesome	incredible
folk	people		forgive	pardon		worthy	valuable

shirt	blouse		room	chamber		woodwork	carpentry
house	mansion		gift	present		end	finish

The next period in our history, usually referred to as the medieval period, would gradually bring all the initially-conflicting strands of diversity together. The inhabitants of Packington would begin to lay out their village in a form still recognisable today. They "kept calm and carried on", ploughing, sowing, tending, harvesting, and in the winter they broke the ice on their troughs, and tried to keep themselves warm by keeping their home fires burning. Eventually they would all begin to speak a single composite language. They would cope with a civil war which tore the country apart. Much later the residents would learn to read and write themselves, and, begin to, literally, and metaphorically, "sing from the same hymn sheet", but that's a later story.

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