

The Bexley Area in the Domesday Book

An explanation of the six areas in the London Borough of Bexley which are mentioned in the Domesday Book.

In 1066 William of Normandy defeated the English under King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, Harold was killed and William was crowned King. Most of the land owned by the English nobles was confiscated and granted by King William to his followers. The social life of England at this time revolved around the Manor. This was the basic farming unit and could be a sub-division of a parish or could spread over two parishes. The Manor was held by a Lord who might farm it himself or, more likely, let it to tenants. The Lord or his tenant would then sub-divide the land into that for his own farm and that for his villagers. The villagers would then farm their land and provide labour for the farming of the Lord's land. In 1085 William, whilst at Gloucester, sent Commissioners to all parts of the country to find out what each landowner held in land and livestock and what it was worth. To check this survey a second set of Commissioners were sent to report on the first. The Commissioners were major land owners and included Bishops and Knights; they presided over areas unfamiliar to them.

The Commissioners were told to ask the following:

- The name of the place, who held it before 1066 and now?
- How many hides (a land unit roughly 120 acres)?
- How many plough teams owned by the Lord and his men?
- How many villagers, cottagers, slaves?
- How much woodland, pasture, mills and fishponds?
- The presence of a church?
- How much the revenue to the King was worth?

Once the Commissioners had obtained relevant information a rough draft was written by the clerks who accompanied them. This draft is now in the Cathedral Library at Exeter. The final draft was prepared by the Exchequer officials at Winchester and was written down in abbreviated Latin and Roman numerals. When this was carried out, the work was compiled into two volumes known as the 'descriptio' meaning a 'writing down'. Later it was called the Book of Winchester, as it was kept in the Royal Treasury there. By 1170 it was popularly

being called the Domesday Book because like the Day of Judgement - Domesday - there could be no appeal against what it contained. The survey was presented to William in Salisbury on 1 August 1086 and his acceptance of it was his last act as King of England for he returned to Normandy and died the following year. The Domesday Book, therefore, is a unique historical document and from it we can get an accurate impression of life in Norman England. Six areas now in the Bexley London Borough are described in the Survey and these entries are explained in the following pages. The Domesday Book is now in the Public Records Office in Chancery Lane where it may be viewed.

Glossary

To understand the entries in the survey it is important to understand various terms, these are as follows:

Hundred : A division of a shire especially important in Saxon and Norman times.

Sulung : A Kent term, this was a variable measure depending on the soil quality and was the amount of land that could be cultivated using an 8 ox plough team. This was approximately 120 acres.

Acre : Originally a stretch of land of no particular size or nature, came to mean land cleared for cultivation or grazing. In open-field farming it then came to mean as large a strip as could be ploughed by a yoke of oxen in a day.

Meadow : A piece of grassland especially used for growing hay.

Pasture : Land used to provide herbage for cattle very similar to meadow.

Woodland : Often the area of woodland was defined by the number of pigs it would support. The pigs would be allowed to roam the woodlands foraging for food.

Ploughs : Literally the number of plough teams that worked the land divided into those owned by the Lord and those by the tenant. Where there is a team it is presumed that the tenants shared a team with a neighbouring settlement.

Villagers or villeins : A medieval peasant cultivating land in the village fields in return for labour service on the manorial farm.

Smallholder : Men who held land which was not strictly part of the manor, they owed their Lord (often the Lord of the nearest manor) certain dues in the form of money and services.

Cottagers or cottars : Unfree peasants with either a garden or up to five acres of land, probably living in a cottage away from the village.

Slave : Labourer who did most of the work on the manorial farm. They did not normally have any land of their own, and had to be housed and fed at the Lord's expense. It must be remembered that only the heads of households are included in the survey. To obtain a rough population figure the total should be multiplied by four.

Land of the Archbishop of Canterbury

In the Ruxley Hundred, (Bix) Bexley

The land under cultivation before 1066 was 3 sulungs and at the time of the survey this had been reduced to 2. The Lord of the Manor had two ploughs whilst the 41 villagers and 15 smallholders had 10 ploughs. There was a church, St Mary the Virgin, first established in Saxon times and possibly re-built within 100 years of Domesday. There were three mills in the village and it is thought that these were situated at the present site of the Bexley mill, one at Hall Place and possibly one further down river towards Crayford. These were valued at 48s. There were 8 acres of meadow and enough woodland to feed 100 pigs. The total value before 1066 and later was £12; at the time of the survey it was £20 and it paid £30 8s in returns.

In the Little Hundred, (Erhede) Crayford

The land under cultivation was 4 sulungs. The 27 villagers and 2 smallholders had 8 ploughs, the Lord of the Manor had 2. There was a church. The present church of St Paulinus is over 850 years old but the foundation of the church is probably a hundred years older. There were three mills valued at 50s 6d. It is not certain where these mills were along the length of the Cray in Crayford, however, the existence of an early Iron mill and Saw Mills to the east of the town would suggest this area as a possible site. There were 10 acres of meadow and enough woodland to feed 40 pigs. The total value before 1066 and later was £12; at the time of the survey it was £16 and it paid £21 in revenue.

Land in the Bishop of Bayeux

At the time of the survey the Bishop of Bayeux was Odo, the half-brother of King William. Odo and William's other half brother, Robert Mortain, were the largest lay landowners after the King.

In Little Hundred, (Loisnes) Lessness

This was held by Robert Latimer from the Bishop. There was land for 17 ploughs of which the Lord had 1 and the 60 villagers and 3 smallholders had 15. There were also 2 slaves and 3 cottagers. There were 3 fisheries, valued at 4s, 30 acres of meadow and enough woodland for 20 pigs. The value before 1066 was £20; when the Bishop acquired it £18, and at the time of the survey £22. The holder paid £30. The Manor had been 10 sulungs before 1066 but it was 4 sulungs in 1086. The entry concludes with the note that Azor held it.

(Hov) Howbury

This settlement has now almost disappeared. All that is left are the ruins of the 17th century Moat House and a tithe barn. At the time of Domesday this was held from the Bishop by Ansgot and was an area of 1 sulung. The Lord had 1 plough and the 5 villagers 1½ ploughs. There was a mill valued at 10s and also 2 cottagers and 1 slave. There were 12 acres of meadow and enough woodland to feed 3 pigs. It was valued before 1066 at 60s and was held from King Edward by Ascell. It was valued at the time of the survey at £4.

In Ruxley Hundred, (Craie) North Cray

At the time of the survey this was held by Ansketel of Rots and was ½ sulung in area. Rots is a town in Normandy near Bayeux. The Lord had 1 plough and the 7 villagers and 6 smallholders had 1 plough. There was a church, St James, the early history of which is unknown. There was 1 acre of meadow and 3 acres of pasture. The value before 1066, when Leofric held it from King Edward, was £4 and at the time of the survey this was £3.

(Craie) Foots Cray

This was held by William, son of Odger, and was ½ sulung in area. The Lord had 1 plough and the 8 villagers and 4 cottagers had 1½ ploughs. There was a mill valued at 10s. This was possibly on the site that was used for the mill built in 1767, however, there is no evidence to support this. There was also 1 slave and enough woodland for 6 pigs. The value before 1066, when Godwin Foot held it from King Edward, was £4. Later it fell to £3 but was again £4 by the time of the survey. It is possible to use the figures from the Domesday Survey to

compare the settlements, however, it must be remembered that both sulungs and acres were variable measures depending on the quality of the soil farmed. A total population figure is achieved by multiplying the head of household figure by four, taking the average household as being four people.

Area of land used for farming

	Land under cultivation (acres)	Meadowland (acres)	Pasture (acres)	Woodland (to support pigs)
Bexley	240	8	-	100
Crayford	480	8	-	100
Lessness	480	3	-	20
Howbury	120	12	-	3
North Cray	60	1	3	-
Foots Cray	60	-	-	6

Population

	Villagers	Smallholders	Slaves	Cottagers	Total Heads	Population (Est. by multiplying by 4)
Bexley	41	15	-	-	56	224
Crayford	27	2	-	-	29	116
Lessness	60	3	2	3	68	272
Howbury	5	-	1	2	8	32
North Cray	7	6	-	-	13	52
Foots Cray	8	-	1	4	13	52

Conclusion

The most populated area was by the river at Lessness. This area probably included Erith, which is not mentioned in Domesday. The Parish Church of St John the Baptist was in existence at this time but is not mentioned. It is known that it was re-built by the Normans, so it is possible that at the time of Domesday it was in a derelict state. The Church, being on the river, was vulnerable to attack. Lessness had the largest area of meadow land, probably on the marshes, but less woodland. Bexley and Crayford would appear to be well wooded and

of roughly similar size and population. The other settlements of, Howbury, North Cray and Foots Cray were significantly smaller.