Wirral Archives Service Workshop
Medieval Wirral (11th to 15th centuries)

The Norman Conquest

The Norman Conquest was followed by rebellions in the north. In the summer of 1069 Norman armies laid waste to Yorkshire and Northumbria, and then crossed the Pennines into Cheshire where a rebellion had broken out in the autumn – they devastated the eastern lowlands, especially Macclesfield, and then moved on to Chester, which was ‘greatly wasted’ according to Domesday Book – the number of houses paying tax had been reduced from 487 to 282 (by 42 per cent). The Wirral too has a line of wasted manors running through the middle of the peninsula. Frequently the tax valuations for 1086 in the Domesday Book are only a fraction of that for 1066.

Castles

After the occupation of Chester in 1070 William built a motte and bailey castle next to the city, which was rebuilt in stone in the twelfth century and became the major royal castle in the region. The walls of Chester were reconstructed in the twelfth century.

Other castles were built across Cheshire, as military strongholds and as headquarters for local administration and the management of landed estates. Many were small and temporary motte and bailey castles, while the more important were rebuilt in stone, e.g. at Halton and Frodsham. The castle at Shotwick, originally on the Dee estuary, protecting a quay which was an embarkation point for Ireland and a ford across the Dee sands. Beeston castle, built on a huge crag over the plain, was built in 1220 by the earl of Chester, Ranulf de Blondeville.

The Earls of Chester

The possibility of future unrest in Cheshire was eliminated by the dispossession of English landholders and their replacement by Normans. Earl Edwin of Mercia was replaced by Hugh d’Avranches, the first earl of Chester.

The earls of Chester were among the most powerful barons in England. Local courts were headed by the earl’s justiciar, while the earl’s chancery and exchequer at Chester castle secured local powers of taxation. For a century and a half the Norman earls ruled their marcher territories and carried the war of conquest westwards into Wales. The earls of Chester were:

1. Hugh d’Avranches, ‘the Wolf’ or ‘the Fat’ (1070-1101) – an important counsellor of William I, who contributed sixty ships to the invasion of England but remained behind to govern Normandy.

2. Richard d’Avranches (1094-1120) – the son of Hugh, who married Matilda of Blois, the daughter of Stephen, count of Blois and later king of England. He died in the White Ship disaster.
3. Ranulf le Meschin (d. c. 1129) – a cousin of Hugh.

4. Ranulf de Gernon (d. c. 1153) – a supporter of Matilda during the Anarchy, he fought at the battle of Lincoln (1141), but later defected to Stephen.

5. Hugh de Kevelioc (1147-1181) – the son of Ranulf de Gernon, he joined the baronial revolt against Henry II (1173-74), was captured after the battle of Alnwick, but later had his estates restored and served in Henry’s Irish campaigns.

6. Ranulf de Blondeville (c. 1172-1232) – a witness of Magna Carta in 1215, he went on to defeat the baronial rebels at Lincoln in 1217 and in that year went on the Fifth Crusade to Egypt.

7. John the Scot (c. 1207-1237) – a nephew of Ranulf, he died childless at the age of thirty, and the earldom reverted to the Crown.

Since then the earldom of Chester was given to successive heirs to the throne as a personal domain – since 1301 it has been associated with the Prince of Wales. Cheshire continued to have its own courts and parliament, and began to be referred to as a palatinate from 1297. Cheshire continued to have a virtually independent government the abolition of the palatinate by Henry VIII.

Local Government

The Cheshire of the Domesday Book was far larger than that of later centuries, including what was to become Flintshire and parts of Denbighshire, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Westmorland. In 1182 the lands between the Ribble and the Mersey became part of the new county of Lancashire. The English conquest of north Wales culminated in the Statute of Rhuddlan in 1284, by which the English county system was imposed. The county of Flintshire was established, and four lordships created in what later became Denbighshire. The boundaries of this smaller Cheshire lasted until the twentieth century.

Local government was carried out by the hundred court – the court of the hundred of Wirral was based at Willaston. The hundred court, attended by a reeve and four chief men from each township, discussed local issues and promulgated new laws, and elected two sergeants of the peace.

The Forest

In the middle ages forest did not mean woodland, but was legal term for an area outside the common law and subject to the king’s personal authority, in order to preserve game for hunting. The three forests of Cheshire, Wirral, Delamere and Macclesfield, were under the authority not of the king but of the earls of Chester – the hundred of Wirral was converted into forest in the 1120s by Ranulf le Meschin, the third earl of Chester.
The forest law proscribed harsh punishments for any form of encroachment such as the erection of buildings, the planting of hedges, the extension of cultivated land. Normal farming was inhibited, even though Wirral remained densely settled and intensively farmed. Poaching was punishable by blinding or death.

Alan Silvester was the first chief forester of the Wirral. By the late thirteenth century the office had passed to the Stanley family, who saw it as a means of personal enrichment. In 1353 the Black Prince visited Cheshire, and the hundred of Wirral complained to him that the foresters ‘have repeatedly oppressed the common people of Wirral by many crimes, to their grave damage. Furthermore, the same men have openly issued threats against the said common people so that none of them dared complain about their behaviour or prosecute them.’ The people of the Wirral petitioned for the abolition of the forest, and in 1376 Edward III granted the Charter of Disafforestation, which referred to the people as having ‘sustained so much in the way of damage, oppression and loss on account of the forest there’.

After the disforestation five enclosed deer parks were maintained in Bidston, Hooton, Shotwick, Puddington and Neston.

**Domesday Book**

William rewarded his followers with estates confiscated from English landowners. In 1086 the Domesday survey was carried out, to assess how much was due to the king in tax, and to settle disputes within the new landholding class.

The Wirral appears as the hundred of Wilaveston. 45 manors are listed [in Cheshire?] – Eastham was the second largest manor, after Chester, in the whole county, at 22 hides – over a fifth of the Wirral. (The hide was originally the amount of land to support a family, but later became a variable unit of assessment for the ‘geld’, or land tax.)

Twelve of the twenty-eight former lords of the manor bore Norse names: Arni, Gamel, Gunner, Osgot, Ragenald, Ravenswart, Thored, Toki, Ulf, Ulfkel, Ulfketel and Winterlet. Between them they had held seventeen manors, nine in southern and eastern Wirral.

The main landowners in the Wirral peninsula at the time of the Domesday survey were the bishop of Chester; the abbey of St Werburgh; Hugh, earl of Chester; Robert, son of Hugh; and Robert of Rhuddlan, a cousin of the earl of Chester. Lesser landowners were Robert the Cook, Richard de Vernon, Walter de Vernon, William Malbank, William FitzNigel, Hugh de Mara, Ranulph, Osbern son of Tezzonis, Nigel and Hamo.

The new earl of Chester gained six Wirral manors with a total area of over 40 hides. Robert of Rhuddlan was given eleven manors with an area of over 15 hides. William Malbank was given seven manors with an area of about 18 hides.
The Domesday Book records 427 heads of household in the Wirral – with a multiplier of five to include family and dependants, this gives a population of approximately 2,185.

Nearly 90 per cent of the population of the Wirral were peasants. The largest groups were the villeins (villagers), nearly 40 per cent of the population, and the bordars (smallholders), just over 33 per cent of the total. Villeins were ‘tied to the soil’ – the lord of the manor let them have a portion of land to live on in return for working a number of days per week on his personal demesne.

A lower class of peasant were the ploughmen or oxmen (bovarii), who made up over nine per cent of the population of the Wirral. The lowest class were the slaves (servii) who belonged to their lords and had no land – they made up over seven per cent of the population of the Wirral.

Along with the rest of Cheshire, Wirral was home to a number of riders (‘radmen’) who were common in the border counties – they were probably messengers, escorts or bailiffs for their lords, were given land in return, and sometimes employed their own peasants. There were also twelve ‘Frenchmen’, military retainers rewarded with land.

Freemen

The Church

Cheshire was originally part of the diocese of Lichfield. In 1075 the first Norman bishop moved the diocesan seat to Chester, choosing the collegiate church of St John the Baptist as his cathedral. In 1102, however, the next bishop, Robert de Limesey, moved the see to Coventry. Thereafter Cheshire was part of the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, whose bishops retained a palace at Chester and were major landowners in the county. In the fourteenth century the archdeaconry of Chester, comprising Cheshire and south Lancashire, acquired considerable independence within the large diocese.

The Domesday Book records 33 places with a church or priest in Cheshire, but this is an underestimate – there were probably 45-50. Five priests are recorded [on Wirral], in Burton, Eastham, Landican, Neston and Poulton Lancelyn, and two churches, at West Kirby and Wallasey. After the Norman Conquest many new churches were founded by local lords, e.g. at Nantwich and Bromborough. By 1200 there were at least 65 churches and chapels in Cheshire, and a survey of 1541 lists 94.

In the east of Cheshire the parishes were often very large, in the west (including the Wirral) they were smaller, as the west was more prosperous and had a higher population.

Religious Houses
Earl Hugh re-endowed St Werburgh's abbey in Chester, but most other monasteries were founded by lesser families and so were relatively small and poor, and none of them were noted for their learning.

**Birkenhead Priory**

Birkenhead Priory, a Benedictine house, was founded in the early 1150s by Hamo de Massey, third baron of Dunham Massey, who granted it the manors of Moreton, Claughton, Tranmere, Over Bebington, Saughall Massie and Bidston; pasture in Bidston, Moreton, Saughall and Tranmere; and the right to fish and claim wreckage in the Mersey.

Charitable relief for travellers using the nearby ferry put a strain on the resources of the priory, and in 1318 the prior petitioned Edward II for permission to build a guest house and charge for food and drink. In 1330 he petitioned Edward III for the right to run the ferry service and charge a toll. From this point the priory had an adequate income.

In 1357 the tolls were:

- Foot passenger on market day – ¼ d.
- Foot passenger on other days – ½ d.
- Footman with a pack – 1d.
- Man with unladen horse – 1d.
- Man and laden horse – 2d.

**St Werburgh’s**

The abbey of St Werburgh's began as a late seventh-century church dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. Ethelfleda, the Lady of the Mercians, enlarged it into a college of secular canons. The body of St Werburgh was buried there in 875 and the church was rededicated to her. In 1092 the church was reformed as a Benedictine monastery and granted extensive estates by Hugh, the first earl of Chester.

By the mid-fourteenth century the abbey owned the Wirral manors of Bromborough, Childer Thornton, Chorlton, Croughton, Eastham, Greasby, Irby, lea, Noctorum, Overpool, Great and Little Sutton, and Woodchurch. It had the advowsons (the right to appoint vicars and receive the great tithes) at Bidston, Neston, Wallasey and West Kirby.

**Hilbre Island**

By 1081 Hilbre Island was home to an outlying chapel of St Werburgh’s, dedicated to St Hildeburgh. The island became a popular destination for pilgrims in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

**Abbey of St Mary, Basingwerk**
By 1291 the abbey of St Mary owned lands in the parish of West Kirby, with the right to appoint the priest there. Their monastic farm gave the name to the township – Grange – in which it was situated. The abbey also owned the windmill which stood on the site of Grange Beacon.

**Stanlaw Abbey**

In 1178 John FitzRichard, the sixth baron of Halton, founded Stanlaw Abbey, a Cistercian monastery. However the abbey was built on an exposed site and suffered a series of disasters – in 1279 it was flooded by the Mersey, in 1286 its tower collapsed, and in 1289 it was partly destroyed by fire. In 1296 the monks moved to Whalley in Lancashire.

**Economic Improvements**

The abbots and priors were important and improving landowners. By the 1290s the abbot of Chester had turned 140 acres of waste in Irby, Greasby, Bromborough and Plymyard into farmland. In the late thirteenth century the prior of Birkenhead enclosed waste at Wolveton near Birkenhead and cultivated new land in Claughton. At the same time the abbot of Whalley (formerly Stanlaw) was fined 6s. 6d. for enclosing a wood near his grange in Stanney, and the brothers of the leper hospital at Spital were given a licence to plough up five acres of the forest.

Marling was an important investment. In the late thirteenth century the abbot of Stanlaw made five marlpits at Backford. In the late 1340s the abbot of Chester was in trouble for digging 35 marlpits in Greasby and 65 in Irby. It is estimated that an acre of Wirral land required 100 loads of marl, at 3s. a load (i.e. £15).

St Werburgh’s Abbey made the largest contribution to the economy of the Wirral when in 1278 it was granted a charter by Edward I to hold a weekly market and, from 10-12 June, an annual three-day fair in Bromborough. (In 1299 Burton received a charter for a weekly market and annual fair in July, and it operated as an outlying port for Chester.)

**Hospitals**

In the Middle Ages several leper hospitals were established which eventually became places of support for the poor, elderly or infirm, or otherwise deserving. There were three on Wirral:

- The hospital of St Andrew at Denhall, near Burton, which helped shipwrecked mariners and poor travellers from Ireland – founded in 1230s – the master of the hospital was also rector of Burton until c. 1494-95

- A leper hospital between Thurstaston and Irby

- Spital (‘hospital’) – a small chapel dedicated to St Thomas the Martyr was built before 1183. In 1283 a leper hospital was established, probably
attached to the chapel. According to a charter of 1260 divine service was regularly performed there by the almoner of Chester, and masses said for the souls of the bishop of Coventry and those of the earls, abbots and monks of Chester.

The Countryside

Arable farming was of major significance in Cheshire, with ‘ridge and furrow’ evidence of open field farming extensive in central Cheshire (although the fields were smaller and the system less uniform than the classic three-field system of the Midlands). Most Cheshire townships probably had such fields, but in many townships the process of enclosure was already well advanced by 1500. The main cereal crops were probably oats and barley.

The population of Cheshire and of England grew during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, putting pressure on the system of agriculture to feed the people – woodland and grazing lands were brought into cultivation, with marl pits dug to provide top-dressing for the new ploughland. In Wirral over a thousand acres of ‘new ploughings’ were listed in a 1303 survey.

By the early fourteenth century marginal land was being ploughed, as at Frodsham where the coastal marshes were brought into use. At this time Cheshire probably had more arable land than at any time before or since. In 1298 Burton had 760 acres of arable, 300 acres more than in 1813.

Between Domesday Book (1086) and a manorial ‘extent’ (or survey) of 1296, the population of the village of Burton increased by 300 per cent – owing to Burton’s rise as a port and to population growth. The population was also diversifying. In 1086 there was only a rider and a priest alongside the peasants. In 1296 there were also cobblers, a smith, a cutter and a merchant.

There were also fisheries all around the coast, especially at Wallasey, Hoyle Lake and Shotwick. There were windmills for grinding corn at Grange in West Kirby, Great Meols, Neston and Stanney.

Towns and Trade

Apart from Chester, Nantwich, Middlewich and Northwich, there was no town of any size in Cheshire in the eleventh century.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries trade and population expanded, and markets were founded. Stockport was granted a charter around 1260 by Sir Robert de Stockport, allowing it to have a weekly market and a seven-day annual fair. Macclesfield became the administrative centre for the hundred, manor and forest of Macclesfield – as a free borough it also had the right to a merchant guild which also collected the market tolls, imposed fines, and conducted the market (‘piepowder’) courts.
Chester was the largest town in the north west, although it was small by national standards. Its population – probably about 1,500 in 1086 – grew rapidly, perhaps doubling in the twelfth and thirteenth century. However after the Black Death it went into a decline, and by the late fifteenth century the port of Chester was beginning to silt up, with outposts further down the estuary beginning to develop. However Chester remained important as the county capital, and was the leading port of the north west, trading with Ireland, France and Spain.

**Salt**

In the middle ages salt was extracted from natural brine springs. The salt deposits were laid down 220 million years ago, during the Triassic period, when seawater flowed inland, creating shallow salt marshes across the Cheshire basin. As the marshes evaporated, deep deposits of rock salt were formed.

Salt was used in the middle ages to preserve meat for the winter. As a result the salt-mining towns of Cheshire, Nantwich, Middlewich, and Northwich (also Droitwich in Worcestershire), were very important, with saltways radiating from them. There were many salthouses in these towns where the brine was evaporated in lead pans. Even after the claims of the king and the earl, there was still enough for everyone of note to hold and profit from at least one salthouse in thewiches.

**The Black Death**

Between 1310 and 1330 northern Europe saw some of the worst and most sustained periods of bad weather in the entire middle ages, characterised by severe winters and rainy and cold summers. Unusually heavy summer rain and cool temperatures led to the Great Famine of 1315-1317. The population of Europe shrank by between 10-25 per cent.

Between 1348 and 1350 the Black Death swept through Europe, killing between a third and a half of the population. It reached southern England in the summer of 1348, and spread over the north of England in the summer of 1349. In Macclesfield about half of the tenants on the earl’s estates died. The abbot of St Werburgh’s and the prioress of St Mary’s in Chester died within a few weeks.

Large areas of arable were abandoned. At Frodsham over one third of the arable on the lord’s estate was converted to pasture between 1350 and 1370. The wholesale conversion from arable to pasture following the Black Death (and subsequent returns of bubonic plague) was the earliest sign of Cheshire’s long-term move towards dairy farming.

Hamlets on the Wirral shrunk in the later medieval period, such as Poulton Lancelyn, Barnston, Woodchurch and Moreton. The port of Meols and the markets of Burton and Bromborough went into decline. The small markets of
Cheshire came to an end and only the strong remained – well established urban markets serving a wide area and with good road access.

The Black Death brought opportunities for the survivors. Peasants exploited their scarcity value to demand better pay and conditions, and often used the profits to buy more land.