

Amongst the many dates to be celebrated this year will be the 950<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Hastings, which brought us the Norman Conquest. The impact of this was soon to be seen in new Norman castles and churches as symbols of the new regime, while Norman nobility and churchmen replaced those of Saxon England. At the grass roots level, however, the population had to carry on as before.

King William, as an outsider, was naturally curious about the details of his new territory, so that, after a few years he commissioned a survey. Completed in 1086, this was later known as the Domesday Book since it resembled the 'Last judgement'. Although the King commissioned it, the efficiency of its production was to be a lasting tribute to the Saxon administrative framework and its associated settlement and agricultural systems which he had inherited. These had been developed during the previous two centuries, as Saxon Kings such as Alfred and Athelstone reorganised the Kingdom as a response to the Danish Wars. Our national pattern of Shires and Shire towns is but one of their legacies which we still live with. Ecclesiastical divisions could be even older, although Hundreds as subdivisions of shires have however lapsed.

The three main concerns of any medieval government based on a feudal hierarchy were: Who owned what and by whom?; How much tax could it yield? and What was that land's potential for food production? Domesday Book attempted to answer these questions as can be seen from Bicton's own entry (translated from the original latin and abbreviations):

*Holdings of St Chads Church:*

*Baschurch Hundred*

*The church itself holds Bicton, Wiger holds from it, 2 hides which pay tax. In lordship 1 plough 4 villagers and one free man with 2 ploughs, 2 others would be possible*

*The value was (1066) 10s now 15s*

Clearly some of this needs further explanation:

Churches at this time were important landowners and locally St Chads also held Rossall, half of Onslow and Shelton, St Alkmunds held Preston Montford and Dinthill while St Marys held Mytton. While founding these churches, the Saxon Kings, nobility and Bishops had thus provided them with rents and Tithes for their support. Wiger, as tenant of the church, would have been the nearest thing which Bicton had as a resident 'Lord of the Manor'.

Other villages in this area were held by various subtenants under Roger de Lacey, Lord of Oswestry, and his relations such as the Corbets. As at Bicton there were also some 'free men', but they soon disappeared as everyone had to submit to one feudal lord or another.

When it comes to taxation, we are all familiar with the different 'bands' for the calculation of Council Tax and in some respects the 'Hidage' system of the Saxons was similar. Each village was assessed with a number of Hides which approximated to about 120 acres of arable land, while a quarter of each, termed a 'virgate' of about 30 acres, was deemed enough to support a village family. 'Smallholds' would have had a lesser share. Bicton was similar to its neighbours in being in the 1-2 Hide 'band'.

Reliable food production was the foundation of any well run feudal state in which the various lay and religious elites 'consumed' the output of all these producers at village level, rather like the pyramid of numbers in a natural ecosystem (e.g. one pike feeds on many minnows, which in turn feed on countless flies and weeds without which the whole system would collapse). In an age of poor communications, Kings and nobles tended to move around their territories in order to consume those supplies from their scattered properties.

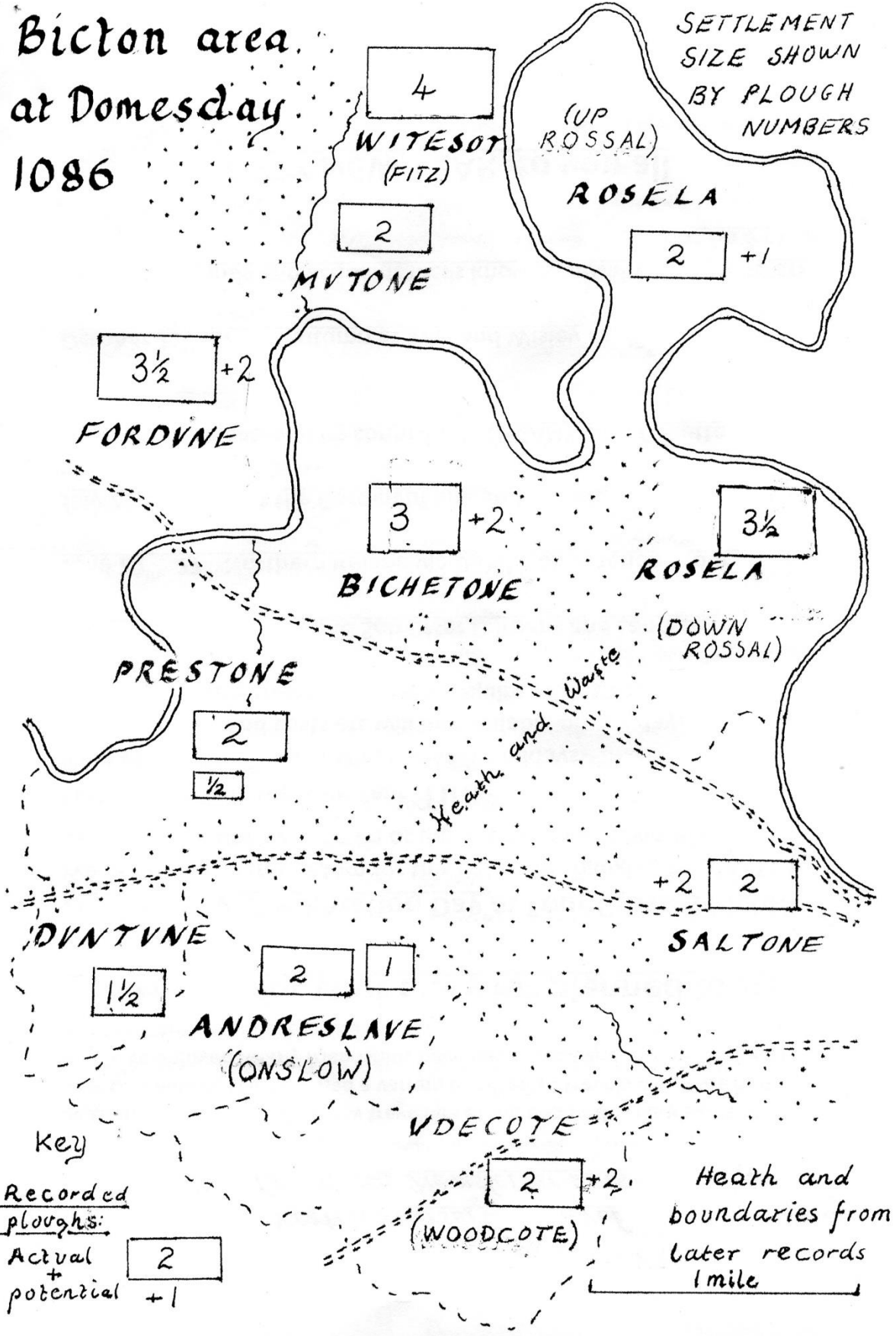
One measure of actual production, as opposed to 'estimated tax bands', was the actual number of plough teams in use. Each village had been organised as a communal or collective farm (like the latter Soviet model) by the Saxon Kings creating what we term the 'Open Field System'. Villages thus each contributed to the ploughs and the draught oxen and acted as a team during the work, hence the need to mix their individual plots together. They were also obliged to work their landlord's part which was normally mixed in too, rather than being a separate estate.

A plot of plough teams can therefore give a better idea of the relative sizes of our local settlements and demonstrates that the basic pattern of farming communities was already in existence, although later much altered. The very small 'townships' of Calcott, Udlington and Oxon were however not mentioned at this time and their origins must remain a mystery. Both Preston Montford and Onslow appeared to have two different estates within them, but only in the case of Onslow did this feature persist as a parish boundary running through the settlement.

Altogether therefore, it can be seen how this ancient survey can still help us understand the present.

# Bicton area at Domesday 1086

SETTLEMENT  
SIZE SHOWN  
BY PLOUGH  
NUMBERS



Key  
Recorded  
ploughs:  
Actual 2  
+  
potential + 1

Heath and  
boundaries from  
later records  
1 mile

