

Norman Conquest and High Medieval 1066 – 1500

The Domesday Book

In 1086, William the Conqueror decided to find out more about the country's assets. He sent out surveyors to visit settlements across England to check who held the land and what it was worth.

The list of their findings was bound in several volumes and known as the Domesday Book. It is pictured opposite.

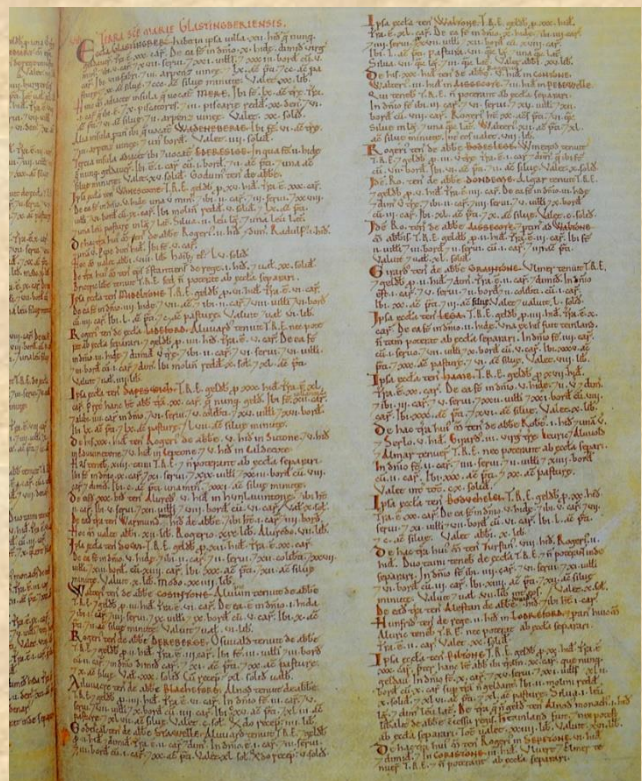
Several terms used in it need explanation. A hundred was originally an area where about 100 families lived but this number had probably changed by 1086. Each hundred included 10 or more of today's villages. The men met regularly at a moot where they discussed local affairs. The land which a bailiff managed for the Lord of the Manor was called the demesne and included all the woodland. He rented the remainder to others.



Sethlindone (Shillington) was in the Clifton hundred and Ramsey Abbey held it. It had 27 villagers, many of whom were probably farmers, 5 smallholders and 4 slaves. These 36 people were the heads of household and the total population was over 4 times that. There was a “broken” water mill which was not worth anything and people must have been grinding wheat by hand with quernstones to make flour. Pigs were allowed to forage in woodland and there was enough of it for 100. Two plough teams worked on the demesne. Shillington was worth £12, the same as it had been in 1066.

Pechesdone (Pegsdon) was also in the Clifton hundred and held by Ramsey Abbey. More people lived there- 37 villagers, 7 smallholders and 5 slaves and the manor contained two watermills. The woodland was smaller, enough for 60 pigs. Before 1066 the manor had been worth £12 but this reduced to £10 by 1086.

Echam (Higham Gobion) was in the Flitt hundred and smaller than Shillington or Pegsdon. Five freemen had held the manor in 1066 but William gave it to Hugh de Beauchamp who was tenant-in-chief and he rented it out to William de Loucelles. It had 14 villagers, 2 smallholders and 5 slaves in 1066 when it had been worth £12. The value had sunk to £8 by 1086.



A farming revolution

Norman rule saw the population grow, increasing demand for food. Shillington had at least three large 'open' fields- Town Field to the east, Church Field to the west and Windmill Field to the north. More land was ploughed up to make Hanscombe End and Apsley Common fields. The flat area north of Pegsdon was Wor Field with Luton Hill Field and Beacon (later corrupted to Deacon) Hill Field on the slopes. They were divided into selions (strips) and some farmers had more than others.

Wheat was the most important crop and used for making bread. Barley, beans (which added nitrogen to the soil), root crops and possibly hemp were grown the following year. In the third year, the field was left fallow and grass and weeds sprang up. Livestock were allowed in to graze and their manure fertilised the land ready for the next wheat crop.

Bringing home the harvest

Harvest work was laborious and done in several stages. The men cut the crops with a sickle, tied bundles into sheaves and propped them up in stooks to dry and ripen thoroughly for several days. Then, they loaded them on 2-wheeled carts or 4-wheeled waggons to take them to barns or thatched ricks for storage.

Children scoured the field for dropped ears of corn and were expected to help with other farm work such as picking fruit or vegetables and fetching water from the well.



This farm cart photographed at Apsley End in the 1920s would have looked similar to those in use many centuries earlier.

Were they really 'castles'?

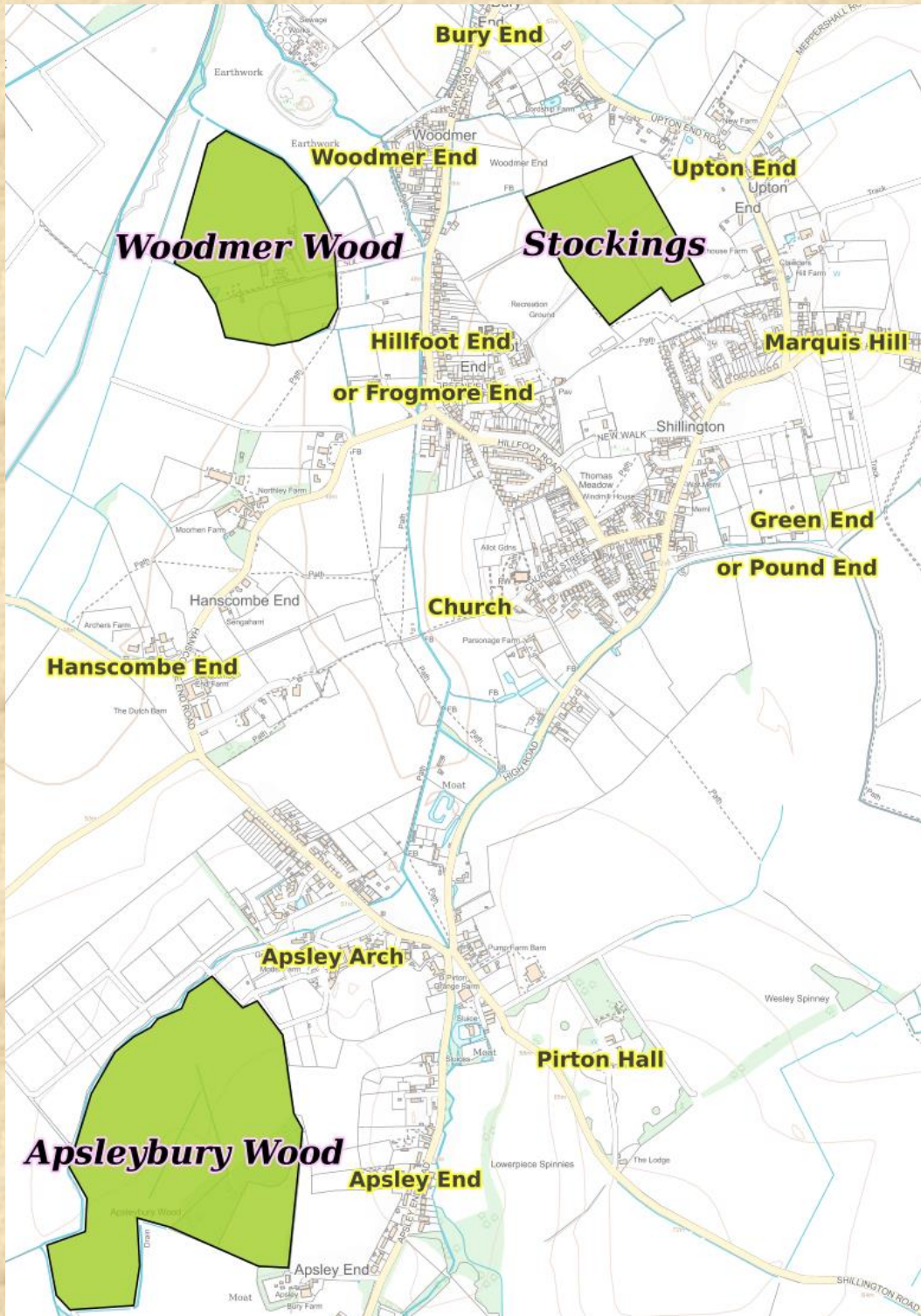
As the landowner did not change, the Norman Conquest may not have meant much to the average Shillington or Pegsdon person. They continued to live in low, thatched, wooden buildings but some of the Norman Lords or their tenants constructed massive motte and bailey 'castles'. The mottes were great mounds of earth, large enough for a dwelling on top and examples remain at Pirton and near Meppershall church.

Common land

Land unsuitable for cultivation stayed outside of the open field system. Tenants shared the use of this 'in common' with others. This common land included areas where firewood could be collected, reeds cut for thatching or livestock taken to browse and graze. Other areas close to watercourses were prone to winter flooding and remained as meadows where the grass was cut in June or July and made into hay. After this had been removed, farmers could take their livestock there to graze on the 'aftermath'. The Lord of the Manor owned the woods and tall trees were valuable. The frame of the lantern of Ely Cathedral contains long tree trunks from Chicksands Wood. He rented the underwood out to woodmen who coppiced hazel bushes to make thatching spars, wattle, hay rakes and sheep hurdles. What was left was bundled into faggots for firewood.

Medieval woodland existed in several places around Shillington including the areas shown on the map below.

Apsleybury Wood is ancient woodland that extended as far as the Hexton brook, when it was many times larger than today. Woodland occupied other areas into the 1800s. Hanscombe Ley Wood was west of Bury Road. East of the playing field is a field that is now called 'Stockings' where the trees had been 'stocked up' or felled.



Water features

Some of the rich constructed a moat around their homes to flaunt their wealth. Moats that survive include the 'Roundabout' in the field next to 124, High Rd and another in woodland near Pegsdon.

A deep moat surrounds Apsley Bury Farm but the best example is at Pirton Grange and featured in the photograph.



They needed a good water supply to fill them and when built, all were linked to springs or ditches. The water table has dropped since then and most only hold water after heavy rain.

Something fishy



Near other springs, the Lord of the Manor ordered the creation of ponds for rearing fish. Four were created near Parsonage Farm in Shillington.

There were two rectangular fish ponds near the site of a long-gone medieval manor house northeast of Higham Gobion.

Later, earth banks were thrown up nearby to impound a large triangular lake (pictured).

It contains an artificial island, perhaps to allow wildfowl to nest away from predators. Its earlier use had been forgotten when Victorian mapmakers named it 'The Camp'.

In 1252, the king ordered able-bodied men to have longbows in case they had to defend their settlements and archery training became compulsory in 1363.

In Shillington, they may have practised at the Butts, the field between the church and Hillfoot Rd. We don't know whether they ever had to use them.

The photograph was taken looking across the Butts in the 1930s, before the houses in Churchview Avenue and Hillside Close were constructed there.



What's in a name?

Records become more common during the 13th century. Woodmer End is recorded in 1255 and the Coroner's Rolls record that on 7th August 1275, Amice of Apsley End went to fetch water but fell in and drowned. Her sister, Alice, found her dead and Nicholas le Hunte and John the Reeve of Cainhoe supported her account. In the late 1200s, few Shillington people could read and write and those who could recorded it variously as Sitelyndon, Sitelyngdon, Shutlyngdon, Schutlyngdon, Shutlingdon, Schutlingdon and Schettlingdon. In 1276 Shittelington appears and 11 years later, Schelyngton and Schudlyngton where the original -don suffix (hill) had been replaced with -ton (village). The first two syllables continued to be spelt in many ways until 100 years ago.

Pegsdon is written between 1227 and 1287 as Pikelesdene, Pekelesdene, Pakesden, Pachesdena, Pekesdon and Peckesden. It ceased to be a separate parish and became part of Shillington before 1311. Early spellings of Higham were Hecham or Hegham and in 1291, the name of its lord was added making it Heygham Gobyon.

The Normans added other words to the language and people's names changed. Most Saxon and early Celtic personal names were replaced by French names like William, Robert and Henry. For the first time, surnames appear, usually based on one's occupation (e.g. Smith, Miller, Carpenter) or where you lived. By 1158, we first hear about Shillington's Hanscombe End. The word 'combe' probably comes from the Latin 'campus' meaning field and 'hans' refers to marshy ground which would have existed once on lower ground to the north of the area. In 1158, Matilda Hanscombe probably lived at Hanscombe End when she inherited 6 acres of land from her husband, Gilbert, in 1222. Alan de Hanscombe owned 1 virgate and 3 roods of land in Pekesdone in 1255. In 1288, Reginald Hanscombe was recorded as a "suitor" of Ramsey Abbey. The Hanscombe surname crops up frequently throughout Shillington's history.

Raking it in

After the Norman invasion, the economy grew and Ramsey- like most of the Abbeys- had become very wealthy due to bequests of money and land. Many of the businesses they set up initially to supply their own needs, expanded and became extremely profitable. Trade in wool was in full swing and it was England's most important export. Abbeys sometimes sold directly to merchants in Flanders or Italy but a small group of wool merchants lived in Dunstable and there must have been many sheep in the surrounding area.

Another local sign of prosperity in the early 1300s was the creation of a market in Silsoe, recorded in 1318. It must have thrived as in 1334, Silsoe was the 6th most valuable market town in Bedfordshire. In 1320, able-bodied men were once more required to practise archery regularly in case they were called up to fight.



Sheep grazing at Higham Gobion

We need a bigger church

Fewer men were needed to tend sheep than grow crops and the population fell in some villages. Shillington, though, benefitted from jobs created when Ramsey Abbey decided to replace Shillington's Norman church with a new collegiate church to serve a wide area.

Work began in the late 1200s on what would be a much larger building that would be decorated in the Roman Catholic style. To accommodate it, the top of hill may have been extended as the ground seems to be unnaturally steep at both ends of the church. The builders used a brown sandstone that was brought from the Greensand ridge a few miles to the north, presumably from one of the quarries in Silsoe, Cainhoe or Clophill.

By 1333, funds had run low and parishioners were asked to donate towards the rebuilding of the nave. A setback occurred in about 1360 when the east end of the church collapsed and it took another 40 years before the rebuild was completed. Like other churches of this time, it would have been bright and colourful inside.

It is this church (albeit with modifications) that still stands today and makes such an impressive landmark approaching the village from every direction.

Higham Gobion church, dedicated to St Margaret, also dates from the turn of the 13th century and occupies another prominent hilltop site.

Victorian rebuilding has replaced much of the original.



St. Margaret's Church, Higham Gobion

From good to bad to worse

Two centuries of favourable weather came to an abrupt halt in 1257 after a massive volcanic explosion in Indonesia spewed debris into the atmosphere and led to the 'year without a summer'.

Conditions improved until 1315 when terrible flooding affected this area. Three years of poor harvests followed and famine broke out. The plague or Black Death was a horrible disease that spread across Europe and reached England in 1349. It seemed to relent but came back with a vengeance. The worst outbreak in this area may have been around 1370. The vicar of Shillington, William Bachelor, was among those who perished and the village may have lost a third or more of its population. Plague wiped out some villages and left Lower Gravenhurst and Higham Gobion with scarcely any survivors. In 1563, there were still only two families living in Higham.

What's going on?

Understanding of the sciences was still in its infancy and to explain such calamities, people were vulnerable to all sorts of superstitions and bizarre theories evolved. On occasions such as Midsummer's Eve and Hallowe'en, they lit bonfires, kept lanterns burning all night and rang church bells to drive away evil spirits.

The eccentric behaviour of some people, usually older women who were called witches, proved that the devil possessed them and they deserved punishment. It was common for offenders to be ducked in ponds. If they survived, they were deemed guilty and liable to further punishment.