

HISTORY OF FRITWELL

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History of Fritwell by J. C. Blomfield

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COMPILED BY

J. C. BLOMFIELD, M.A.,

Rector of Launton, and Rural Dean.

"Happens we come into a world prepared
As for some regal guest : prepared, arrayed,
With temples, shrines, and statues of the gods,
Cathedrals where unflinching twilight dwells,
Subduing souls to sympathy and prayer :
Lakes, woods, and waterfalls, and cities girt
With walls majestic circling sumptuous tombs
Of scepters superseded, thrones interred,
Prodigious pageant open to us all."

(Aurifer's Poem.)

LONDON:
ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.
1893.

FERT-WELLE, FRET-WELLE, FRITWELL.

THE altitude of the ground on which the village of Fritwell stands, according to the Ordnance Survey taken in 1874, and as marked on the north-west corner of the church tower there, is 416'596 feet above the sea-level at Liverpool. On this high tableland of the great Oolite formation there are two streams flowing in opposite directions, though rising from the same source, which are tributaries of two of the chief rivers of England. One flows eastwards through Fritwell to Fringford, there become of sufficient volume to turn a mill, the first in its course, and thence into the main stream of the great Ouse. The other flows in an opposite direction towards Somerton, where, falling over a small cascade, it reaches the Cherwell, and then finds its way into the English Channel. The streamlet through Fritwell is sometimes claimed as the source of the river Ouse.

"Amongst the many small rivulets, perchance it may not be unworthy of notice that the two considerable rivers of Stour and Ouse, though but small here, and running but little way in it, yet rise in this county, the one at Swalcliff, which goes into the Severn sea in the West; and the other at Fritwell, whence it runs into the sea between Lincolnshire, and Norfolk in the east of England."¹ But this is not an undisputed claim. In the parish of Farthingoe, in Northamptonshire, closely bordering on this county, there is a spring called Ousewell, or, as it is corruptly pronounced, Owzel, adjoining the turnpike road, at the foot of the hill descending eastward from the village, which is also said to be the source of the river Ouse. Thence the spring flows to Brackley:

"From Brackley breaking forth, through soles most heavenly sweet,

"By Buckingham makes on, and, crossing Watling Street,

"Shee with her lesser Ouse at Newport next doth twin,

"Which from proud Chiltern neere, comes eas'ly ambling in."²

There are "waters under the earth" as well as on its surface. Underground channels and caverns are hollowed out by the flowing waters, with the help of the carbonic acid gas which they contain. All rain-water which does not run to the ocean through rivers sinks into the ground, joins the waters there, and in time generally finds its way to the ocean. But the direction taken by the underground streams is much affected by the kind of soil they pass through. Loose, soft, gravelly, or sandy soils allow water free passage, but tough clay or hard rock act as barriers. Sometimes a large quantity of water will collect over one stratum of rock or clay and under another, unable to find an outlet. If the water has found its way there from a greater height, the pressure of other water trying to flow in from behind will force it to take advantage of any opening that may occur. These natural openings or outlets we call springs or wells, and such abound in this district.

On the edge of this upland, northwards and eastwards, the Romans formed two great roads, the Portway, and the branch road leading to and from it. The line of the former may still be traced in a grass lane which runs between Fritwell and Somerton, and that of the latter in the road leading from Souldern to Tusmore.³

¹ Plot's Natural History of Oxon, chap. II.

² Drayton's Poly Albion.

³ Early History of this Deanery, pp. 7, 12.

On the other side of this upland southwards, the British inhabitants of this district began in the VIth century to form their great line of defence against the invading Saxons. This took the usual form of a huge bank and ditch, stretching for many miles across the country. Traces of this embankment (called from its construction in some parts Wattlebank) are distinctly visible in Fritwell Lane, at the north-west corner of Ardley parish.¹

This embankment is supposed to have been utilized two centuries later, to form the boundary between the kingdoms of the Mercians and West Saxons. "After several successful attempts upon the kingdoms of Kent and Northumberland, king Offa did at last resolve to recover this county of Oxford from the West Saxon kings, and enlarge his Mercian kingdom to its antient limits, the banks of the Thames. Upon which in the year 775, or 778, or 779, he brought an army across the frontiers about Souldern or Fretwell in this county, where ran a branch of a Roman way, called now The Port-way, and in some parts Wattlebank, etc., and marched to Bennington or "Bynsyntun," etc.²

Among the springs of this upland district, one hidden in the thick woodland attracted the attention of the early English settlers, and was named by them "*Feri-well*" or "*Fret-well*" ("will" or "well" being Anglo-Saxon terms for a natural spring). This spring is situated on the right hand side of the present road to Somerton, soon after passing the parish church, and has been long known as "The Town-well" or "The Spring" (the latter name being given on the Award map). A few years ago it was walled in, but the neighbours still draw water from it, its overflow supplying a pond close by. The first form of this place-name occurs twice in the Domesday Survey: "*Fertwelle*," "*Fertwelle*," and several suggestions have been made as to its etymology.

"*Feri*" or "*Fret*" are interchangeable forms of the same word, derived from "*fret*" or "*freten*," to corrode or eat away, this being a contracted form of "*for-eat*" and Germ. "*frett*" of "*ferret*." Hence this place-name may signify that the ground around the well, or at its mouth, was much broken and jagged.³

Frith als. *Frighi* (in semi-Saxon *Frid*, in bad Latin *Fretum*) means a wood. In Reid's English Dictionary this word is said to be derived from the Welsh *Ffrith*, a woody place. Hence *Ffrithwell* may mean the woody well, the well in the wood. It appears that Dr. Rawlinson the scholar and antiquary, considered this to be the original name, for so he wrote it in his notes on this parish, and some confirmation of this conjecture may arise from the name commonly given to this village in late times, "Fritwell in the Elms."

Frey als. *Frea*, als. *Fro*, als. *Frode*, was the name of one of the most famous Northern gods presiding over rains, and sunshine, and all the fruits of the earth.⁴ "Among the victorious Germans, the northern heathenism existed in full strength. In many names of places, at the water springs, the water-sheds, in the designation of the days of the week, the names of the gods of Germany and of the North appear; the kings trace their descent directly from them, as their immediate ancestors; the Sagas and poems about them symbolize those balces with the elements, the storm, the sea, and the powers of Nature, which are peculiarly characteristic of the northern mythology."⁵ The name of the god of fertility is adjectively used for fertility, and so *Frea-(t)-well* or *Frod-well* may mean the well sacred to the god of rain and fruits, the abundant well.

¹ Early History of this Deanery, p. 25.

² Kennett's P. A., chap. VII. He confesses the Roman road and the British embankment.

³ Early History of this Deanery, pp. 33, 34.

⁴ Mallett's Northern Antiquities.

⁵ Ranke's History of England, vol. I., p. 11 (Clarendon Press edition).

In comparatively modern times, according to the wise advice of Pope Gregory, an attempt was made to obliterate the memory of *Frea* or *Frode*, and an easy substitute was found in the present name.

A further obvious derivation is from *St. Frideswyde*, the patron saint of Oxford, and the subsequent connection of this parish with the priory dedicated to her seems to lend a ready sanction to such a suggestion. But there is no reason to suppose any connection of this spot with that saint before the XIIth century, and if any existed, the name is more likely to come from her mother *Safrida* than from herself.

Hence, whichever of these derivations we accept, it is clear that, in the early days of the English settlement, this well lay in the uninhabited parts of this district, quite separated from the "tons," and its more civilized parts.

It affords some clue to their habits of life that the majority of place-names among the Celts and Saxons are in some way connected with water. Our English forefathers disliked the life of cities, and lived in hamlets placed in forest clearings, or on the banks of forest streams and wells. Thus come the frequent terminations of "bourne," "well," "ley," "holt," and "clere." The IXth, or perhaps the Xth century, had probably passed away before any settlement was formed near the Fert-well. From the parish church being dedicated to St. Olave, we may further conjecture that the first settlers here were some wanderers who had been driven from their homes in this country during the period of the Danish invasions.

PLOUGHLEY HUNDRED.

On the edge of the high ground which bounds this district, within the limits of what now forms the parish of Fritwell, on a spot overlooking the wide valley of the river Cherwell and on the side of the Portway, visible from a long distance, a great mound was raised over the burial-place of some chief, either Briton or Roman. Some centuries later an Englishman of some distinction, named *Pokede* or *Pough*, was thought worthy of an honourable burial. So, according to the custom of those early times, the old tumulus was opened that the body of this great man might be laid within it. The tumulus from that time became known as *Pokede-la-waha*, or *Powede-love*, i.e., the burial-place of *Pokede* or *Pough*.¹ Five roads met at this spot, two Roman roads (the Portway and the branch through Tusmore) and three English trackways (from Bicester, Fritwell, and Somerton), and thus it became a convenient place of meeting to the inhabitants of this district. In order to protect themselves from invasion and wrong, the English colonists, soon after settling in this country, formed a plan of arranging themselves in companies of a hundred warriors. Each company was composed of picked champions, the representatives of a hundred families, men who were ready in case of war to uphold the honour of their house and to fight for their hearths and homes. These hundred families recognised a bond of union with each other, and ranged themselves under one name for general purposes, whether for defence, administration of justice, or other reasons. Once a month they held a meeting, called the Hundred-moot, which was attended by four men and the reeve from every township, and also by the eorls and ceorls of the district. At this meeting, as soon as their chieftain had dismounted from his horse and fixed his spear in the ground, each warrior touched the latter with his own spear in token of their compact, and pledged himself to mutual support. At this assembly also criminals were tried, disputes settled, bargains concluded, and when the English became Christians, and had learnt to write, many of their transactions in the Hundred courts were inserted in the chartularies of abbeys or registers of bishops.² It shows

¹ Early History of this Deanery, pp. 19-68.

² Our English Villages. See Early History of this Deanery, p. 44.

the wild state of the country at a late period, that the Hundred-moots gathered, not in villages, but at some barrow or den, at burn or ford, in comb or vale, in glade or woodland, here beside some huge boulder or stone, there on the line of a primeval foss-dyke, or beneath some mighty and sacred tree.¹ So here beside the old tumulus the freemen of this hundred assembled year after year, through many a century, to arrange and settle the business which affected their common interests. The name of this trysting-place assumed from time to time various forms, and was written *Ploughlegh*, *Poghedele*, *Ploughley*, the latter being that by which this Hundred is now known.

The old tumulus has been thrown down and the ground levelled. In the year 1845 some human bones were dug up by men digging stones near a mound on what may be supposed to have been the site of this tumulus. These were then removed and deposited in a small new mound formed of earth taken from the old tumulus, at a distance of about 50 yards from the spot where they were found.² At a short distance from the spot where Souldern turnpike gate once stood, on the left-hand side of the road leading from Souldern to Fritwell, there is now to be seen a semicircular mound, enclosed partly by the wall skirting the road, and partly by another wall attached for the purpose of confining the earth within its limits. This mound is about 6 feet high, and the radius of the semicircle is of about the same measurement. It stands partly in a garden at the back of the Bear Inn, and partly in the adjoining field. The high wall, which forms the base or diameter of the semicircle, conceals it from the view of passers along the road, but it can be plainly seen from the garden and field on the other side. It was with a feeling commanding sympathy that these remains of departed heroes were deposited, not in the level ground, but in a miniature mound raised for the purpose, and in the same earth in which they had at first been buried.

FRICTWELL VILLAGE.

A peculiar feature in this village is that it is divided into two separate parts. In one part, near the Fertwell, was the original settlement. Here stand the church, the manor-house, and a few scattered houses of the better sort. The land belonging to this estate stretched northwards towards Souldern, and sideways eastwards and westwards. At some distance (the road turning round and becoming almost parallel) are the dwellings of the bulk of the population. Here a later settlement was formed, when some enterprising descendants of the first settlers stretched the cords of their habitation, and took in hand for cultivation the wild land lying southwards. The long, wide meadow which divides these two sections of the village was the freeboard between the two estates. They were remaining two separate estates in the Saxon period of our national history.³

After Duke William of Normandy had received the Crown of England from the hands of Archbishop Ealdred, amidst shouts of "Yea! Yea!" from his new English subjects, the kingdom seemed so tranquil that only a few months had passed after the battle of Senlac when King William, leaving England in charge of his brother Odo, Bishop of Baieux, whom he made Earl of Kent, and his minister, William Fitz-Osborn, whom he made Earl of Hereford, returned for awhile to Normandy. During his absence the Normans left behind in England oppressed the English, and were supported in their opposition by the two regents. In some parts the English rose in rebellion. In December, 1067, William returned, and, after putting down resistance in the

¹ Green's Conquest of England, chap. I. Until the last century there stood a pollard oak in the parish of Shelford, Berks, where the Hundred court used to be held.

² A native inhabitant of Fritwell, now an octogenarian, says that he remembers seeing some workmen covering in the bones,

which had been removed from the place where they had been found, within this mound.

³ Notes on Fritwell by Rev. P. Hookins, published by Oxfordshire Archaeological Society.

south-eastern counties, set himself to conquer the rest of England. It is not to his victory at Senlac, but to the struggle which followed his return from Normandy, that King William owes his title of the "Conqueror." The completeness of the confiscation which followed is seen in the vast estates which the Conqueror was enabled to grant to his more powerful followers.¹ Two hundred manors in Kent, with an equal number elsewhere, rewarded the services of his brother Odo, and grants almost as large fell to the royal minister Fitz-Osborn. Among the estates given to these were the two manors at Fritwell.

The question here arises, Why did the Conqueror keep these two estates separate? Why did he not give them to one and the same person? And we see here an instance of his general policy in the government of his new dominions. His first object was to keep the English in subjection, but he was not afraid only of the English. He had good cause to fear lest the feudal army, which was to keep down the English, might be strong enough to be turned against himself, and that the barons (as the greater tenants in chief were usually called) might set him at naught, as Eadwine and Morkere had set Harold at naught, and as the Dukes of Normandy had set at naught the kings of France. To prevent this he adopted various contrivances. In the first place he abolished the great earldoms. There was never again to be an Earl of the West Saxons like Godwine, or an Earl of the Mercians like Leofric. In the next place he weakened the territorial authority of the barons. Even when he granted to one man estates so numerous that if they had been close together they would have extended at least over a whole county, he took care to scatter them over England, allowing only a few to be held by a single owner in any one county. If, therefore, a great baron took it into his head to levy war against the King, he would have to collect his vassals from the most distant counties, and his intentions would thus be known before they could be put in practice.² Thus, of the fifty estates in Oxfordshire which he gave to Bishop Odo, five only (Fringford, Finmere, Fritwell, Shelswell, Somerton), and of the twenty-eight estates in the same county which he gave to Earl William two only (Fritwell and Newton Purcell), lay near each other.

THE MOIETY GIVEN TO BISHOP ODO.

Bishop Odo's estate comprised the original village settlement, reaching from the manor-house to the boundaries of the parish towards Souldern. It consisted of about 545 acres, of which 320, more or less, were wild pasture; 213, more or less, were arable; and 12 meadow, reserved for hay. About 54 acres of this arable land were in the occupation of the absent lord, about 80 in that of tenants, while the rest had fallen out of cultivation. Six male adults were the resident workmen; namely, a slave, who lived and was maintained in the manor-house, and was continually employed on the demesne lands; four villeins, who did labour services, and held land in their own occupation; and one bordarer. No change or disturbance of any importance, except of ownership, took place between the reign of Edward the Confessor and the taking of the Great Survey, for the money value of the estate, £3 = £90 of modern value per annum, remained unchanged during that interval.

Land of the Bishop of Baieux.

"Rainald (or Wadard) holds six hides in *Fertwelle*. There is land to four ploughs. Now in "the demesne one plough with one bondman; and four villanes with one bordar have one plough "and a half. There are twelve acres of meadow. It was and is worth three pounds."

There was evidently a doubt in the compilers of the Domesday Book who was the sub-

¹ Green's History of the English People; Student's History of

² Student's History of England, by S. R. Gardiner, vol. I., 1891.

tenant of this manor. Wadard, the Norman warrior, is mentioned as holding several manors in Oxfordshire belonging to the Bishop of Baieux, but as the other manor in this parish was undoubtedly held by Rainald, a question seems to have arisen whether the same person may not have been the sub-tenant of both manors. This question cannot now be decided. But a further question arises, Who was Rainald? Rainaldus Canutus is mentioned as holding land at Chippenham (Domesday, Wilts, p. 73 a). Rodborne Cheney is mentioned (*ibid.*, p. 71 b) as held by Rainaldus under Milo Crispin, and the Exon Domesday (Jones's "Wiltshire," p. 163) further defines him to be Rainaldus Canutus. It is a fair inference, therefore, that Canutus and Cheney are the same person, and that other like-named places, Barford Cheney, Middleton Cheney, etc. have some connection with him. Several instances also occur in Domesday in which land held by Rainaldus passes to a family of the name of Foliot, as *e.g.*, at Chilton Foliot, and Drayton Foliot in Wilts, at Albury, Noke, Winnal, Rousham, and in this parish of Fritwell in Oxon. We may therefore be nearly certain that the sub-tenant of this manor was Rainald Canutus al' Cheney, but who he was more than a tenant of several manors, chiefly under Milo Crispin, and whether or not he was the same person as was an Abbot of Abingdon, we cannot exactly know.¹

After Bishop Odo's banishment from England by King William II. this, like his other estates in this district, passed to the trusty knight William de Arsic, and to the barons, his descendants, and from them to the Barons de Grey of Rotherfield, in the course of the XIth, XIIth, XIIIth, and XIVth centuries, who successively became the superior feudal lords of it.

The inferior lords in possession were for a long time members of the family of Pipard, the same as held the adjoining manor of Somerton. The first known owner of this manor was

Gilbert Pipard.

"A.D. 1187. The warden or steward of the honour of Wallingford accounted to the king "for several sums in money granted to Gilbert Basset, Ranulph de Glanvil, Gilbert Pipard, Alan "Basset, Robert de Witefelde, and William Paganell."²

In succession came :

Nicholas Pipard,

Ralph Pipard,

who was in possession of this manor in Henry III.'s reign.

"*Fretewell.* The lord Ralph, son of Nicholas, holds half a fee in the village of Fretewell "of the heirs of Robert Arsich by the service of iiij^s, and iiij men, and they come twice a year to "the Hundred, and the Sheriff receives yearly of the view ij^s."

"Of the chief articles of enquiry they know nothing except of the default of the lord Ralph, "son of Nicholas."

During the turbulent reign of Henry III. the Crown revenues had been much diminished by the tenants in capite alienating lands without license, and withholding their dues, and by powerful ecclesiastics and laymen usurping the rights of holding courts, and committing other encroachments. The people, too, had been greatly oppressed by exactions at the hands of sheriffs and other officers, and by false claims to free-warren and illegal tolls. One of the first acts of Edward I., on his return from the Holy Land after his father's death, was to remedy these abuses. For this purpose he appointed special commissioners for inquiring into these grievances throughout the realm. From the inquiries taken in pursuance of this commission, it appears that Ralph

¹ In the History of Somerton it was conjectured that Rainald, the sub-tenant of that manor, was the Abbot of Abingdon, but the writer was not then aware of the many notices of Rainaldus

Canutus which Mr. Mowat has put together in his Notes on Domesday.

² Kennett, P. A.