Domesday Book **Dan O'Sullivan January 2011**

The first important written source for most English villages is, inevitably, Domesday Book. This was compiled by the Normans in 1087 to give William the Conqueror a precise idea of the taxable wealth of England. Quite a 1ot of information can be gleaned from its highly abbreviated, and often cryptic statements.

The main legal and territorial unit used by the Normans was the manor. There are actually seven manors mentioned in Domesday within the area which became the parish of Great Ayton, not counting the manors of Nunthorpe and Newton which were also at one time included within that parish. Two of the seven have long ceased to be even hamlets, and are now single farms. They are Ergun, the ancient name for Aireyholme, south of Roseberry, and Tonnestale, once the hamlet of Tunstall between Nunthorpe and Tanton. The other five comprised four manors in Great Ayton and one in 'Alia Aton', i.e. the other Aton, or Little Ayton. The original Domesday entry for these five manors looked like this (although the entries for Ayton are scattered, as Yorkshire manors are listed according to their owners):

Eruricscire

Terra Regis

In Atun. Ulchil. II. car ad gld. Tra ad. I car. XVI.s.

In Atun. Hauuard. II. car trae ad gld. Tra ad. I. car. X.s.

Terra Comitis Moritoniensis
In Atun. ad gld. VI. carucatae. & III car poss. ee. Ibi hb Norman. I.M. Ne ht Nigel de com. In dnio. I. car. & VIII. uill cu. II. car.Aeccla & VI. ac pti. TRE. ual. XL. sol. m. XXX. sol.

Terra Roberti Mallet
In Atun. Aldred Edmund Turorne. hbr. IIII. car tre ad gld. ubi. II. car poss. ee. Ne ht Robt ibi. I car. & IX uill cu. II. car. & III. acs pti. TRE. ual XX. sol. m. XXV. sol & IIII. den.

In alia Atun. hb Aschil. II. car tre ad gld. & I. car potest ibi. ee. Robt ht & wast. e. TRE. ual. X. sol.

Translated and de-abbreviated this means:

Yorkshire

Land of the King
In Atun Ulchil had two carucates for geld. Land for one plough. 16 shillings.

In Atun Hauvard had two carucates of land for geld. Land for one plough. 10 shillings.

Land of the Count of Mortain
In Atun six carucates for geld and three ploughs can be there. Norman had one manor there. Now Nigel has it of the Count. On the demesne there is one plough, and there are eight villeins with two ploughs. A church and six acres of meadow. In King Edward's time it was worth 40 shillings, but now 30 shillings.

Land of Robert Malet
In Atun Aldred, Edmund and Turorne had four carucates of land for geld where two ploughs can be. Now Robert has there one plough, and nine villeins with two ploughs and three acres of meadow. In King Edward's time it was worth 20 shillings, and now 25 shillings and four pence.

In the other Atun Aschil had two carucates of land for geld, where one plough can be. Robert has it, and it is waste. In King Edward's time it was worth 10 shillings.

This tells us that in Great Ayton there were 14 carucates of land for geld, and two more in Little Ayton. A carucate was an area of about 120 acres, or the amount of land which a plough team of eight oxen could handle during the year. However, *carucates for geld* were not so much a measure of land under cultivation as units of tax assessment, based on what cultivated land the village had held twenty years earlier. More accurate measures of land actually being cultivated at the time may be statements such as *land for one plough,* or *where two ploughs can be.* If a plough team could look after 120 acres, and the survey tells us that there were seven such measures in the village, then there were only 840 acres of cultivable land at this time. There were also 17 villeins, each of which might imply a peasant family of perhaps five people, giving a total population of 85. Generally, therefore, the village was undercultivated and sparsely populated.

King Edward's time meant 1066, the date of Edward the Confessor's death. As can be seen from the difference between the number of carucates and the actual number of ploughs, the village's prosperity had gone down considerably since then. The Little Ayton manor has, in fact, no value at all, and is described as *waste.* This decline was a feature of wide areas of the North of England, and was due to the 'harrying of the north' by William himself. There had been three successive rebellions during 1068-70 against the Normans by discontented Saxons in league with the Danes under Sweyn. In reprisal for these William ravaged the countryside between York and Northumberland, systematically destroying crops, animals and houses. This had taken place several years before Domesday Book but, as the historian of Cleveland, Canon Atkinson, explains, the countryside had still not recovered:

> *The accounts of the immediate ravaging are graphic and terrible enough, but they are perhaps outdone in significance by the passionless witness of the great Survey, the entries of'Waste', 'Waste', 'Waste', attached through page after page to the Yorkshire lordships which, seventeen years after, had not recovered from the blow. For nine years at least no attempt was made at tilling the ground; between York and Durham every town stood uninhabited; their streets became lurking places for robbers and wild beasts. Even a generation later the traveller beheld the ruins of famous towns, with their towers rising above the forsaken dwellings, the fields lying unfilled and tenantless, the rivers flowing idly through the wilderness. At the time the scene was so fearful that contemporary writers seem to lack words to set forth its full horrors...* (J. C. Atkinson, *History of Cleveland*, vol. I, 1874, p. 107)

Atkinson may be exaggerating a bit in his description, but he does calculate from the figures in Domesday that the entire population of Cleveland in 1087 must have been considerably less than that of the one smallish parish of Danby where he was vicar when he was writing his history in the mid-nineteenth century.

In spite of the harrying there is mention of a church in the village in 1087. This was a fairly unusual feature as there were very few churches in the area at the time, although both Guisborough and Kildale also had one. The present All Saints church has Norman features so there seems no reason to doubt that the church of Domesday Book was on the same site. Very likely under the existing nave of All Saints there are the remains of an earlier Anglian building, as was discovered under the ruined medieval church at Brompton near Northallerton.

Domesday Book shows that in 1087 Ayton was divided into four manors, two belonging to the king, and the others to the Count of Mortain and Robert Malet. Robert, Count of Mortain, was the half-brother and favourite of William the Conqueror, and when, after the rebellions mentioned above, the Saxon noblemen lost their lands, much of it was granted instead to Normans such as him. The Count of Mortain was given altogether some 215 manors, although these were deliberately scattered all over England to prevent him creating a power base in one particular area. Robert Malet was another leading Norman, and was the brother of William Malet who governed York after the conquest and was captured by the Danes in the rebellion of 1069. Both these lords also held extensive lands across the Channel. They were Norman-French in culture, and probably regarded Northern England as an exceedingly barbarous area. Mostly, they let out their new lands to tenants who owed them military service, just as they themselves did to the king. Nigel Fossard was tenant of several of the Count of Mortain's manors.

Both Robert Malet and the Counts of Mortain later lost all their lands to the Crown. In 1102 Robert Malet was disinherited and banished, and two years later William, Count of Mortain (who had succeeded Count Robert) was arraigned for treason, forfeited all his lands, and had his eyes put out into the bargain. We can therefore assume that all four Great Ayton manors ended up in the hands of the king. All, or a large part, of them may have been amalgamated into one manor before being resold or granted to others. In any event, Ayton was, by the early twelfth century, in the hands of the Stuteville family, who are said to have come over with the Conqueror. It was William de Stuteville who confirmed the grant of the church of Ayton to Whitby in the reign of Henry II.