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Francis A. Knight Assisted by Louie M. (Knight) Dutton

Excerpt

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I. County and Shire. The name Somerset.

The word “shire,” which is derived from an Anglo-Saxon root meaning to shear or cut—hence that which is shorn or cut off, a division—was formerly of wider application than it is in our time, and was originally applied to a division of a district or even of a town. There were once, for example, six small “shires” in the county of Cornwall, and there are seven “shires” in the city of York.

Tradition wrongly assigns to King Alfred the division of all England into shires. But the process was really a gradual one, and was the work of many hands; and it was not complete even at the time of the Norman Conquest. Indeed, even now alterations are being made. The county of London has assimilated portions of others besides Middlesex, especially Essex; and, as we shall see later, parts of Somerset have recently been incorporated with surrounding counties.

The object of thus dividing up the country was partly military and partly financial. Every shire was bound to provide a certain number of armed men to fight the king’s battles, and also to pay a certain sum of money

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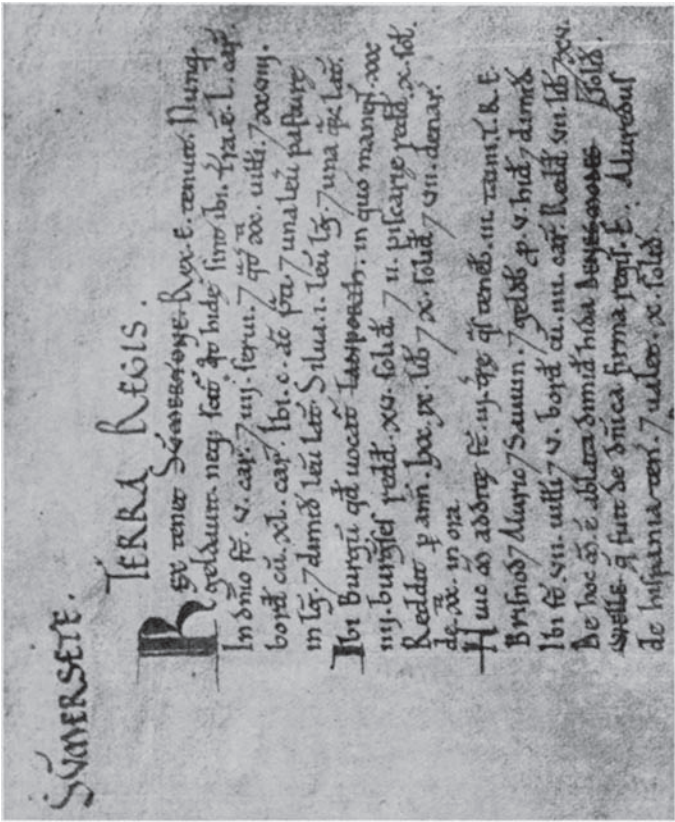
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towards the king's income ; and in each case a "shire-reeve," or, as we call the officer now, a sheriff, was appointed by the sovereign to see that the district did its duty in both respects. The word "county" came into use after the Norman Conquest, when the government of each shire was handed over to a count, a title which originally meant a "companion" of the king.

It is usually considered that the names of those counties which end with the syllable "shire" once formed parts of larger districts or of ancient kingdoms. Those which do not end with it are believed to represent entire kingdoms or tribal divisions. Thus Yorkshire is a "shire" because it once formed part of the kingdom of Northumbria ; and Kent is not a "shire" because it is practically identical with the old kingdom of the Cantii.

In the case of our own county both forms are in use. Some people prefer "Somerset," and some prefer "Somersetshire," and there is something to be said in favour of both forms. Since the county was inhabited, as authorities believe, by a single tribe, the Seo-mere-saetan, "the dwellers by the Sea-lakes," that great inland water which formerly occupied so much of its low-lying districts, and since it thus represents a distinct tribal division, it should be called Somerset. On the other hand, because it was, at a later period, separated from the kingdom of Wessex, there is ground for calling it Somersetshire. Again, "Somersete" is the spelling given in Domesday Book, which was finished in 1086. But in the Exeter Domesday, which was compiled little, if any, later than the wider and more general survey, the name of the county



Facsimile of Domesday Book (slightly reduced)

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is written "Summerseta Syra," that is to say, "Somersetshire." It is "Sumersetescire" in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in an entry made in 1122. It was Somersetshire to Leland and Camden in the days of Henry VIII and Elizabeth, and to writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is Somersetshire in the histories of Macaulay, Froude, and John Richard Green. Even Freeman, who was the great champion of the shorter form, himself frequently employed the longer one. It has been well said that the name of a thing is that by which it is commonly called. And although some of us may prefer to call our county Somerset, on the ground that that name is probably the older, and possibly the more correct, others may fairly claim that the word Somersetshire has been in use for more than eight hundred years.

In either case the name of the county is probably derived from that of the Seo-mere-saetan already alluded to, the tribe who were living here at the time of the Saxon conquest. What little we know of these primitive people will be described in later chapters. They left no written records, and we cannot tell if they had any definite organisation, or were governed by a king. Nor do we know what was their western boundary before the Saxon invasion. The Saxons are believed to have established their frontier first at the river Axe, and then at the river Parrett. It is thought that the border-line was moved further westward by King Alfred, and that it was in the reign of that monarch that the county assumed its present form.

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

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2. General Characteristics.

Somerset is a county in the far west of England, forming part of the southern shore of the estuary of the Severn, which in consequence of the great importance of Bristol as a seaport is better known as the Bristol Channel. It is a county with a character peculiarly its own. Perhaps there is not, among all the forty shires of England, another in which there is so complete a sense of quiet and repose, of rest and peace and pleasant rural charm, as that which characterises the hills and valleys, the green orchard aisles, the broad and fertile meadows of this beautiful land. It is above everything an agricultural county, and its methods of farming have, in the course of many ages, reached a high degree of excellence. But farming, even at its best, is a pursuit which serves but to deepen the sense of rest and peace. Nowhere is Somerset the seat of any important manufacture. It does not possess even one great industrial town, with roaring mills and crowded streets and the noise and stir of hurrying traffic.

Maritime although it is, there is not, in all its sixty miles of sea-board, a single harbour worthy of the name. The ocean highway of the Bristol Channel lies far out from its shores, and the only substantial advantage that it derives from its position is in its watering-places, some of which—although the largest of them would elsewhere be called a little town—have of late years become popular as health or holiday resorts.

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The coast of Somerset, much of which lies very low and some of it even below the level of high-water mark, has been formed to a great extent out of mud and sand brought down by the Severn, whose estuary is fringed in many places with broad sands, and still broader mud-flats, where shallow waters make navigation difficult and dangerous.

But the very cause which renders the maritime position of the county of little commercial importance to it, adds greatly to its prosperity in another and very different way. The alluvial lands not only lie along the shore, but extend far into the heart of Somerset. Ages of cultivation have converted what were once almost impassable morasses into some of the most fertile soil in England, and this it is which has gained for Somerset its reputation as one of the best grazing and dairy districts in the island. There is no land in Britain, for example, to surpass in richness the meadows of Taunton Dean, or the even more famous Pawlett Hams on the shore of the river Parrett.

One might well imagine, looking down from the Mendips or the Quantocks or the eastern slopes of Exmoor, that this was a district whose peace had never been broken by the clash of arms. It is, no doubt, a county of long tenures. Macaulay declared that he had found in it farmers in possession of lands that their ancestors had held in the time of the Plantagenets. The castle of Dunster has changed hands only once since its foundation by one of William the Conqueror's knights, while the manor of East Quantockshead still belongs to the

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family who owned it when its details were set down in Domesday Book.

And yet the record of Somerset has been a stirring one. It may be doubted if there are many shires in England of greater interest to the historian. Within its borders are some of the most famous spots in Britain; places of national importance, whose names are as familiar as those of Hastings or of Runnymede. Such, for example, is the Isle of Athelney, where Alfred paused for breathing-space before his great victory at Ethandune. Such is Sedgemoor, last of English battlefields. Then, too, of all heroic episodes in the Civil War, what is more stirring than Blake's defence of Taunton? In traces of times before the dawn of history the county is extraordinarily rich. Few English towns have yielded so many Roman remains as the city of Bath. In few other English counties are the hill-tops crowned with so many ancient strongholds. To the naturalist, the student of architecture, and the lover of beautiful scenery, the attractions of Somerset are of a very high order. It is indeed a county to be proud of, a pleasant land to live in, a region of unfailing interest and charm.

3. Size. Shape. Boundaries.

Somerset, which ranks seventh in size among the counties of England, and occupies about one-thirty-second of the area of the whole country, is irregular in shape, but may be roughly compared to three quadrants of a horizontal oval.

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Its greatest length, measured from east to west along a horizontal line drawn from the cross-roads in Longleat Park on the borders of Wiltshire, to Saddler's Stone, on Exmoor, close to the edge of Devonshire, is 67 miles ; and its greatest breadth, measuring due south from the entrance of the Bristol Avon, is 43 miles. It may be



Gorge of the Avon : Clifton Suspension Bridge

added that it is only in Yorkshire and in Sussex that a longer horizontal line can be drawn. Its area, which varies according to whether we are speaking of the registration county, the administrative county, or the ancient geographical county, is rather more than a million acres, or not far from 1700 square miles. Compared with the counties that adjoin it, it is a good deal

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SIZE SHAPE BOUNDARIES 9

smaller than Devon, but is larger than Dorset, Wiltshire, or Gloucestershire. It is ten times the size of Rutland, but is only one-third as large as Yorkshire.

Somerset has on the north two natural boundaries, the Bristol Channel and the Bristol Avon, which stream divides it from Gloucestershire. On the other sides its frontiers are more arbitrary and artificial, and depend to a less degree upon physical features. It is bounded on the east by Wiltshire and Dorset, the border being marked for a short distance in the north-east by the river Frome, and further south by the Wiltshire Downs; and on the south by Dorset and Devon, the Black Down Hills forming part of the frontier between it and the latter county. On the west it is bounded by Devon, which there shares with Somerset the great upland of Exmoor.

Some years ago, no fewer than twenty parishes, or parts of parishes which were separated from Somerset and were entirely surrounded by one or other of the adjoining shires, were still considered to belong to this county. But these outlying districts have all been handed over by Act of Parliament to the counties in which they are actually situated. Such, for example, are Poyntington, Maiden Bradley, Culmstock, and Mangotsfield, which are now included in Dorset, Wiltshire, Devon, and Gloucestershire respectively.

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4. Surface and General Features.

Somerset is a beautiful county; and its varied scenery, its hills and valleys, and its wide stretches of level and low-lying plain, each with its own particular charm and its own historic and antiquarian interests and associations, are among its principal and most valued possessions.

The impression left on the mind of the traveller who crosses the county by the main line of the Great Western Railway, the railway that joins Bristol with Exeter, and London with the far extremity of Cornwall, will probably be of a flat and featureless region, with few towns, and with scattered hamlets and solitary farmsteads dotted at distant intervals over the green levels of a far-reaching and monotonous plain. Such, indeed, is the character of the turf moors that occupy so much of the north and centre of Somerset, and form one of the special features of the county. Yet Somerset has more of hill than of plain, and it contains some of the finest scenery in the West of England.

The general surface of the county admits of three broad divisions. The north, which is mainly occupied by the Mendips and their more or less connected outlying ranges, is for the most part hilly and undulating. The central region is so flat, and its lines of hill so low and featureless, that it seems, from one of the heights of Mendip or the Quantocks, to be one unbroken plain. On the western edge of this great level rise in turn the Quantocks, the Brendon Hills, and the broad upland of Exmoor, the most elevated district in the county.