1. County and Shire. The Origin of Oxfordshire.

If we look at a map of England we see the whole country parcelled out into shires and counties, each of which has its own story to tell of its origin and formation. A remarkable difference exists with regard to their origin, as great a difference, indeed, as in their size and characteristics. Several were old kingdoms long before one king ruled over a united English land. The southern counties are much older than those further north. The name Kent preserves the memory of an old British tribe, the Cantii, who held the south-eastern corner of our island long before Julius Caesar came to try to conquer Britain. Other counties record Saxon kingdoms, such as Sussex, the region of the South Saxons; Essex, that of the Eastern Saxons; Middlesex that of the mid-Saxon kingdom; while the Angles held East Anglia and divided themselves into the North Folk, or Norfolk, and the South Folk, or Suffolk. The West Saxons were a powerful people and held Berkshire, Wiltshire, and Gloucestershire, and part of Somerset—the later Wessex. Wessex had its own folk-moot and its independent king. These districts were

subsequently divided into the shires which we now see on the map.

On the north of Wessex was the powerful kingdom of Mercia, which maintained its integrity until the tenth century. It had many warrior rulers who waged war on the adjoining kingdoms, fighting incessantly with the neighbouring people of Wessex. About the year 912 the partition of this large stretch of country was made. It was separated into *shires*, i.e. *shares* or divisions, parts *shorn* off—for the root-word is the same in each case—these new shires all bearing the name of the chief town around which they were grouped. Thus, Staffordshire, the shire of Stafford, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire, and others were founded, and among them our shire of Oxford sprang into being about the little town which was destined to become a great city, and on account of its university one of the most famous places in England.

It was not then so important a town as it afterwards became, but its position on the great river near the chief ford would render it a place of consequence. Oxford used to be written Oxenford, and it may be that the name is derived from these beasts of burden, "the ford of the oxen," though some learned men tell us that the first syllable comes from the Celtic word Ouse, meaning a river, and that the name means the ford across the river. Earthworks, cromlechs, camps, and roads, tell of the earliest people who inhabited the district. On the west they formed their tribal boundary where the Edge Hills overlook the plains of leafy Warwickshire. On the

south the Thames formed a means of defence, and opposite the Berkshire stronghold at Sinodun, near Wallingford, stands the camp called the Dyke Hills, protected by a double vallum and a trench.

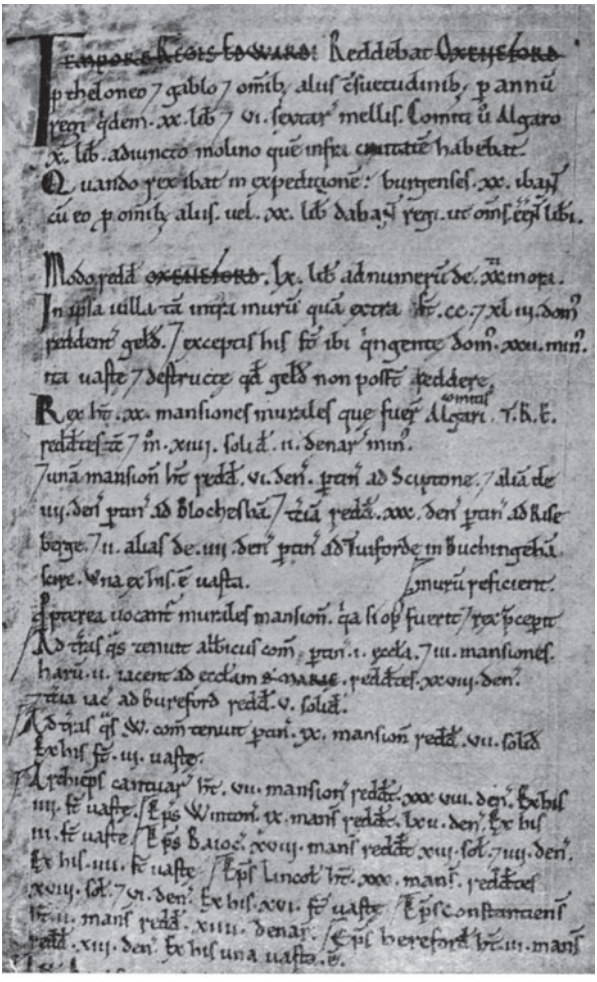
Long before the Romans came, a warlike Celtic tribe called the Dobuni dwelt in the district now called Oxfordshire. They were surrounded by other strong tribes, the Carnabii on the west, the Coritani on the north, the Atrebates on the south (whose chief city was Calleva Atribatum, afterwards the Roman Silchester), and the Catuvelauni on the east. There was much fighting between these tribes, and the Dobuni extended their sway to the Severn. Then they were harassed by their neighbours, the Catuvelauni, who inhabited the district now called Buckinghamshire and had at one time for their chief Cunobeline, of whom Shakespeare wrote, calling him Cymbeline.

When Julius Caesar came to Britain he could not penetrate the forests of the future Oxfordshire, and it was left to another great Roman leader, Aulus Plautius, to subdue the Dobuni. We can find several traces of Roman rule in Oxfordshire, though they are not so numerous as in many other counties. The Romans remained in possession until about 410 A.D., when they withdrew to their native land, and Britain was left defenceless. Then came the Saxons and Angles, and this part of our land fell an easy prey to the West Saxons. At the beginning of the seventh century it was part of Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons. Then from the north-east came another powerful Saxon host, the Mercians, who contended

with the West Saxons who had advanced from the south. Fiercely did the battles rage, first one side being victorious and then the other. Penda, King of Mercia, who ruled from 626 to 633, was a mighty warrior, and extended his rule over Oxfordshire, and by treaty with Cwichelm, King of Wessex, made the Thames the boundary-line between the kingdoms. But this arrangement did not last long. For two centuries the rival kingdoms contended, first one gaining an advance and then the other, until at last Egbert, King of Wessex, prevailed in 827 and brought Mercia under his rule. It preserved, however, its geographical boundaries and organisation, being ruled over by an Ealdorman, until at the beginning of the tenth century Mercia was divided, as already stated, into shires, each shire taking its name from its chief town.

With the coming of the Normans the word county was introduced. They applied that word in order to identify the old English "shire" with their own *comitatus*, the district of a *comes* or count. Thus Oxfordshire, "the shire of Oxford," became also known as the county of Oxford. A reference to the Domesday Survey shows that like many of the other southern shires it was divided among smaller landlords or into smaller estates than the great lordships of the midlands and the north. Hence the owners were not so powerful as the barons who led the revolts against the Norman and Plantagenet kings.

It is curious to note that although England became one kingdom the shires or counties retained for centuries their own peculiarities and local customs. They had each their own manners and social traditions. Kent,



Portion of Domesday Book relating to Oxfordshire

for example, retained its custom of gavelkind, whereby the youngest son, and not the eldest as in other counties, was entitled to his sire's property. Certain peculiarities in the building of Wadham College show that it was erected by Somerset masons. Even in such things as shoeing horses each county had its own peculiar custom. Thus Charles II in his flight was once detected by his horse's shoes having been made in four different counties.

Since the population of the country has become more migratory, and railways quickly convey us from one end of the kingdom to the other, and the universal application of economic laws to the whole realm has come into force, these peculiarities of shires have for the most part disappeared.

2. General Characteristics. Position and Natural Conditions.

If we divide England into two fairly equal parts by a line running from east to west, Oxfordshire lies in the centre of the southern half. There is no coal in Oxfordshire and few openings for modern industrial activity. It is essentially an agricultural county. Camden well described Oxfordshire as "a fertile country and plentiful, the plains garnished with cornfields and meadows and the hills beset with woods."

In former days Oxfordshire was noted for its wool trade, and other enterprises which depended on the water-power of its rivers and streams. These rivers form a distinguishing

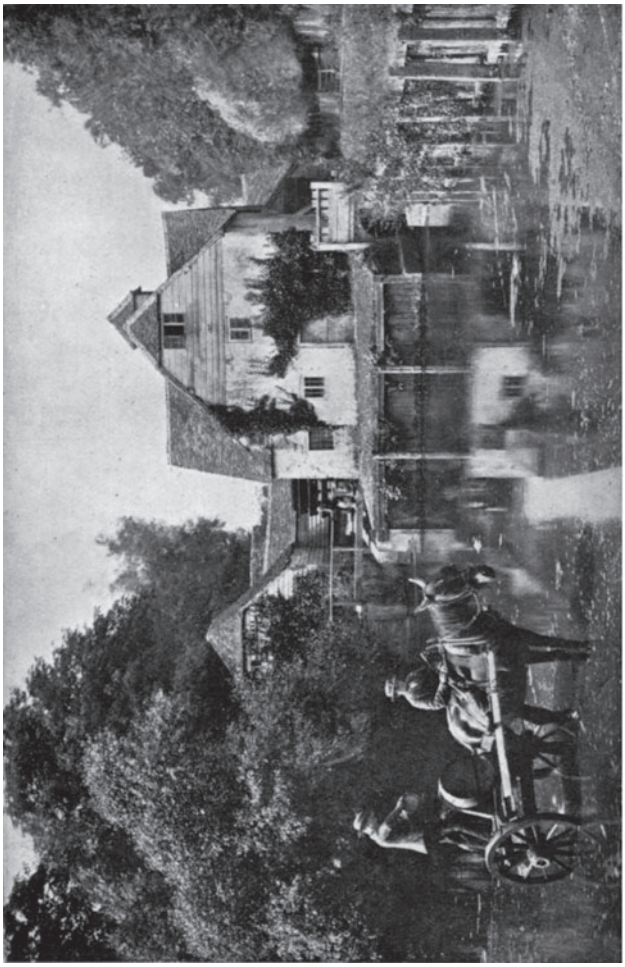
feature of the county. If we take a map of the county and colour all the rivers blue, we see that it is one of the best watered shires in England, showing, indeed, a perfect network of watercourses. This was observed by Dr Plot, who produced in 1677 his *Natural History of Oxfordshire*. He wrote "that Oxfordshire is the best water'd county

Burford

in England, though I dare not with too much confidence assert, yet am induced to believe there are few better." He might have stated the fact with certainty, if he had known the county better, and we shall presently consider the great river and its tributaries, and perhaps enumerate some of the "three score and ten at least of an inferior rank, besides smaller brooks not worth mention."

These rivers had a great advantage for the trade of the shire in olden days, as they produced a large amount of water-power upon which the primitive wool trade and cloth-making largely depended. Five Oxfordshire market towns are all on rivers. These are Burford, Chipping Norton, Henley, Thame, and Witney, and as we have said, Oxford owes much to its position near the head-waters of the navigation of the Thames. But the days of water-power and waterways are past and gone. Steam engines have long since supplanted the old water-wheels, and in these days of railways we no longer depend on barges and rivers for the conveyance of our goods.

The river Thames greatly promoted the trade of the county in former days. It was the principal means of transit of goods and the great highway of traffic. As early as 1205 King John gave licence to William FitzAndrew to have one vessel to ply on the Thames between Oxford and London. Stone for the building of Eton College was conveyed from the Headington quarries, and before the advent of railways this important river was the great highway, and brought trade and prosperity to the counties along its banks. In ancient times it brought also sundry dangers and disadvantages, and troublesome visitors. The Danes sailed up the Thames and burned and pillaged and slaughtered along its banks. In 871 they came as far as Reading in Berkshire. Later they settled at Oxford. In the latter part of the tenth century they roamed about the country plundering and destroying. In 1006 they sacked and burnt Oxford, and in the next year marched again through Oxfordshire, but at length



Mapledurham Water Mill

under the rule of Canute in 1018 a council was held at Oxford when both Danes and Angles agreed to observe the laws of Edgar, and live in peace. In those days of rapine and slaughter the great river would not have been considered an advantage to Oxford. The bed of the Thames contains stores of weapons which conquerors and conquered have dropped from their warships and canoes, and when the river is dredged we often find stone implements, bronze weapons, swords, and daggers.

Another great natural feature of the shire was the abundance of wood and forest land. It must be remembered that, in its earliest days, England was very largely uncleared scrub or woodland, and in parts true forest land in the modern restricted sense of the term, i.e. covered with large trees. At one time Oxfordshire was almost covered with forests: it was practically a continuous woodland. The royal chase of Woodstock lay on the north, and contiguous was the forest of Wychwood (perhaps "the wood of the Hwicci"). Near Bicester was the forest of Bernwood. Stowood, Beckley, and Shotover lay on the east. The Chilterns on the south-east were covered with wild thickets and dense beech-woods, and Bagley Wood extended on the south-west. These forests, full of deer, attracted the attention of Norman kings, and became the favourite royal hunting grounds. In the fourteenth century the Chiltern Woods became the haunt of thieves and robbers, and a Steward was appointed to exterminate these pests and to guard travellers and protect the inhabitants from pillage and murder. Though the robbers have long since vanished,