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W. Bernard Smith

Excerpt

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I. County and Shire. Origin of Staffordshire.

A reader who glances at the map placed inside the front cover of this book will notice that Staffordshire is a roughly oval tract of land with a boundary that seems to have a haphazard course, except where it follows the windings of a river. No greater contrast between such boundaries and those we find in the divisions of Australia, the Argentine, or the various parts of the United States could be imagined. The difference between the irregular and apparently arbitrary outlines of ancient political divisions and the straight boundaries of modern times is like the contrast between the narrow, picturesquely winding streets of our ancient cities and the broad, straight streets of newly-planned colonial towns. The reasons for the differences are similar. The towns of the Old World are generally the result of natural growth round some castle, mill, or harbour; but modern towns are often planned out on paper before a brick is laid or a corner-post driven in. Modern Boundary Commissioners can use the imaginary lines of latitude and longitude as their limits, but older countries are generally

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bounded by natural frontiers of hills or river courses, or are the results of divisions by treaty. Sometimes the union of many smaller units, themselves of irregular shape, has built up a larger division. Staffordshire is an example of this construction.

While the precise date of origin of county divisions in the middle of England is still a historical problem, we shall probably not be far wrong if we say that Staffordshire as a county is about a thousand years old. The Danish tide of conquest washed out many ancient boundaries, and new divisions were required when the ebb came. King Alfred did much to check the progress of the invaders, and his son, Edward the Elder, continued his father's efforts. Edward was helped by his wise and warlike sister, Ethelfleda, or Aethelflaed, the "Lady of the Mercians." Ethelfleda fought well against the Danes in Mercia—as this part of England was called—and built or restored forts in the districts she recovered. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle we read: "A.D. 913...This year by the permission of God went Ethelfleda, Lady of Mercia, with all the Mercians to Tamworth; and built the fort there in the fore-part of the summer; and before Lammas that at Stafford: in the next year that at Eddesbury."

Stafford (i.e. the ford at the *Staeth* or jetty) must have been more important than Lichfield, in spite of the bishop (and, for some time, an archbishop) having his seat at the latter place, otherwise it would not have been chosen as the county town. It was the chief town of five adjacent "hundreds" which were placed under one administration at about this time, and called the *Scire* or *Shire* of *Staeth*.

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COUNTY AND SHIRE

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The term *shire* signified that it was the part *shorn* off, or cut off to form its *share*. These hundreds had irregular boundaries, and the outer limits of the new Staffordshire were therefore irregular too.

The other shires of Middle England, especially those whose names are the same as those of their chief towns, were probably formed in the same way. In the south the land was already divided into kingdoms such as Sussex, the land of the South Saxons, and Kent, the kingdom of the Cantii. When these kingdoms came under the general rule of one overlord, earls—or, as the Normans called them, counts—ruled over them. The English term *Earldom* dropped out of use after the Norman Conquest, and *Comté*, or county, the conquerors' word, persisted as the official name. Historically then, it is incorrect to call such counties as Middlesex, Sussex, or Kent by the name of shires, or to call Warwickshire, Derbyshire, or Staffordshire counties, but the latter word is nowadays used for all.

Many alterations have taken place since that time, both in the number and shape of the counties. Some counties such as Northamptonshire, Northumberland, and Hexhamshire have been merged into others, while in recent years simplification of boundaries has frequently taken place in order that local government may be carried on more easily. The latest alteration in our own county is the addition of Handsworth to the city of Birmingham in 1910 and its transference from Staffordshire to Warwickshire.

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2. General Characteristics.

Staffordshire lies at the north-western border of the group of the midland counties, on the direct line between London and Chester, at the point where the Pennine Chain falls gradually to lose itself in the central plain



Dimmings Dale, near Alton

of England. Its main physical character, except in the north, where the long ridges and deep valleys of the “Moorlands” run north-west and south-east to the Trent valley, is that of level or gently undulating land, of no great height. In early times much of this, no doubt, was covered with forest, though that day has long passed and

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

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the county nowadays, owing to its large population, is thickly meshed with a network of roads, railways, and canals.

A very large proportion of its area—some four-fifths—is arable, and the county was at one time famous for its barley. Owing, however, to the nearness of large centres of population the farmers of Staffordshire have found that dairy-farming is more profitable, and nowadays in many districts almost the whole of the land is under grass. The character of the soil varies with the underlying geological formation: the New Red Sandstone produces a warm and light soil, but of a poor character chemically; on the other hand the soil disintegrated from the red Keuper marl is heavy and rather cold, but its chemical composition and moisture-retaining properties render it very suitable for grass. The hilly districts of the north-east are also suitable for grass.

Cut off from the sea by the surrounding counties and its largest river only becoming navigable for barges as it leaves the county, Staffordshire for centuries did not share in the general progress of England to the same extent as the maritime and home counties. But coal has altered all this, and has made Staffordshire third in point of importance of all the counties in England for manufactures. In the north-west we have the densely-crowded Potteries—the chief seat of the earthenware manufacture in the kingdom. In the south is the great Dudley coalfield, with coal of remarkably good quality, and the unlovely “Black Country,” where, with Wolverhampton and Walsall as centres, iron is very largely manufactured. In the extreme

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east is Burton-on-Trent with its vast brewing industry. Favoured by its position on the main line of traffic and by facilities for reaching the chief markets both at home and abroad Staffordshire has developed very rapidly, and as might be expected, its population has increased enormously.



Hanley, a typical pottery town

3. Size. Shape. Boundaries.

Staffordshire is seventeenth in size among the fifty-two counties of England and Wales. Its present area, 741,298 acres, or about 1159 square miles, is rather smaller than its ancient dimensions, for during the nineteenth century administrative changes were made which gave it 1594 acres

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formerly in Derbyshire and Warwickshire, but took away 3969 acres for the benefit of Worcestershire, and in 1910 Handsworth was taken from Staffordshire and added to Warwickshire. Its greatest length, from north to south, is about 59 miles, and its greatest breadth 37 miles.

The county is roughly oval, resembling a lozenge-shaped inland lake with many promontories and indentations, and even an island in the south—a little bit of Worcestershire separated from its mainland. This isolated portion of Worcestershire was owned by one of the monastic houses of that county and was placed under the same jurisdiction as the rest of the property.

Let us trace the county boundary in a westerly direction beginning at its northern limit on the side of Axe Edge, where, at Three Shires Head, the counties of Stafford, Chester, and Derby meet. For a few miles it follows the windings of the river Dane. Near Bosley it turns abruptly south-west and, leaving Congleton to the north-west, climbs Congleton Edge, running along the top and over Mow Cop (977 feet). After this the boundary travels, with no obvious natural feature to guide it, nearly as far as Woore, where Cheshire gives place to Shropshire as neighbour. Then the little river Tern is met with, which takes the boundary nearly to Market Drayton. Here the line bends abruptly east, round Blore Heath, till turned south again by Bishop's Wood. The course is now irregular though still southerly, making use of the river Mees for about four miles. It just misses Newport, after which it leaves the low land containing Aqualate Mere and runs uphill, crossing Watling Street, and passing

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hard by Boscobel and Kingswood and over the high land to the west of Wolverhampton. Thence it drops down again to the basin of the Stour, enclosing Abbot's Castle Hill in Staffordshire. After rising once more it runs along the watershed between the Stour and the Severn and suddenly turns south-east. Upper Arley and a part of the Wyre Forest were in Staffordshire until 1895, when this curious extension, shown uncoloured on the map, was transferred to Worcestershire.

After rising to the high land on the east of the Stour the boundary turns abruptly north until it again meets that river, passing close by the town of Stourbridge. The line thence runs very irregularly north-east, enclosing most of the Black Country, and, leaving Birmingham to the south and west, follows the Roman Ryknield Street as far as Watford Gap. Here there is another change of direction eastward which lasts until the Tame is met. The boundary is made by this river as far as Tamworth, which lies partly in Warwickshire; then the north-easterly trend is resumed. Near the crossing of the Mease Leicestershire is the next county, but soon gives place to Derbyshire. The Trent lies between Derbyshire and Staffordshire till about two miles below Burton-on-Trent. Here the boundary leaves the river for a short distance and runs along the high land to the east of Burton, thus enclosing the whole of the town. Then the river Dove forms the boundary, except for a slight aberration at Rocester, almost to our starting point at Axe Edge. In this latter part of its course the boundary line has run gradually uphill from the low-lying tracts near Burton

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right to the Weaver Hills, Dove Dale, and the Peak District.

As we have already seen, the irregularities of the boundary are due to the building-up of the county by the grouping of “hundreds.” The hundreds are composed of



The Dove at Hanging Bridge

(The boundary between Staffordshire and Derbyshire)

parishes and estates, and these have boundaries depending upon minor physical features or local conditions at the time of formation. There is a tendency in modern times for county boundaries to be modified in order to simplify local government.

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4. Surface and General Features.

The map placed inside the front cover shows at a glance the general character of the surface of the county. The dark brown colouration in the north indicates that portion of the southern end of the Pennine Chain which is more than nine hundred feet above sea-level. This is the "Moorlands," or stone-wall district of Staffordshire, and if we look now at the map at the end of the book we shall see that this region consists almost entirely of limestone. Camden, who wrote in Latin a geographical work called *Britannia*, of which an English translation was published in 1611, well says of this region, "The North part riseth up and swelleth somewhat mountainous, with moores and hilles, but of no great bignesse, which beginning here, runs like as *Apennine* doth in Italie, through the middest of England with a continued ridge, rising more and more with divers tops and cliffs one after another even as far as to Scotland, although often-times they change their name. For heere they are called Mooreland, after a while the *Peak*, *Blackstone Edge*, then *Craven*, anon as they go further *Stanmore*, and at length being parted diversly as it were into hornes, *Cheviot*. This *Mooreland*, so called for that it riseth higher into hils and mountaines, is a small country verily; so hard, so comfortlesse, bare, and cold, that it keepeth snow lying upon it a long while: in so much as that of a little country village named Wotton lying here under Weverhill [Wootton is two miles north-west of Ellastone] the neighbor inhabitants