



What's in a name: the Langdyke Bush and Court by Richard Keymer

Langdyke is an ancient name.

The Langdyke Bush at the junction of the parishes of Ufford, Upton, Ailsworth and Helpston was the traditional meeting place of Langdyke Hundred and the hundred court.

The hundred was a territorial unit of English local government, intermediate between the village and the shire. The county or shire court was the responsibility of the sheriff, but beneath that sat the hundred court. The hundred court had jurisdiction over civil and criminal matters arising in the hundred. Its jurisdiction was based on customary law. It met every few weeks or monthly at a fixed place, usually in the open air. Originally everyone was expected to attend, but later attendance was confined to certain tenants, and others paid a 'fine', a payment in lieu of attendance. Prominent tenants took the role of judges, but the sheriff presided as judge twice a year, when the court was known as the sheriff's tourn.

Progressively, however the hundred courts fell into private hands, when they became known as Courts leet. Though in theory all jurisdiction belonged to the King, he freely gave and sold the right of holding courts. To a landowner this privilege was very profitable.

Some time after the destruction of the first Peterborough monastery in 920 or thereabouts, an area comprising eight hundreds at the northern end of Northamptonshire became a largely autonomous judicial unit administered from Oundle and called the eight hundreds. One of these was the double hundred of Nassaburgh, which comprised the Vill of Peterborough (the original Medeshamstede) and the hundred of Langdyke, the rural area surrounding the Vill.

Throughout the history of the Peterborough Liberty or Soke under the abbots, the hundred courts were centres for both administrative and legal business.

An insight into the functioning of the Langdyke Court is provided in the diaries of the Third Earl Fitzwilliam. In his letter of 31 July 1701 to his Steward, Francis Guybon, he tells how John Carter, Lord Exeter's coachman, called and told him a story of a highway robbery near Maiden's grave (a cow pasture between Wansford and Stamford) and states that 'It is a great loss, but I hope that the country will not be forced to pay for it' (Hundreds were collectively responsible for

losses by highway robbery). On 7 May 1702, he wrote again to Guybon, stating that ' Mr Ash brought a letter from the Langdyke jury desiring that I lend them £50 at interest' to cover the costs of the robbery. Previously he had written, 'As to lending the countrey money to pay off the robbery money, I could very ill spare it at this time being forc't to make use of all my money at this time and more then all, but the countrey shall not want money from mee if they cannot as easily gett it from another hand, for it's much better to pay a little interest till the rents will pay it off, than to make an assessment in the Soake which will come hardly from the tenants.'

Acknowledgements

The above account draws heavily on James, L. 2001. A Short History of the Soke of Peterborough. Peterborough Museum Society. The record of the robbery near Maiden's Grave is described in Hainsworth, D.R, & Walker,C.(Eds). 1990. The Correspondence of Lord Fitzwilliam of Milton and Francis Guybon his Steward 1697-1709. Northamptonshire Record Society.