

## The Hill of Abingdon<sup>1</sup>

By MARGARET GELLING

ABINGDON is a place-name which offers no difficulty etymologically : it means ' the hill of *Æbba* ', the first element being a personal name, and the second the Old English word *dūn*. The whereabouts of this hill is, however, a problem which has occasioned some discussion, both in the thirteenth and in the twentieth centuries, and an assessment of the opinions which have been advanced may be of some value to those interested in the early history of Abingdon Abbey.

The second work produced in the Rolls Series consists of two volumes, published in 1858 and edited by J. Stevenson, bearing the title *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*. This would be a difficult work for the student to use if it had not been discussed by F. M. Stenton in a monograph published in 1913, entitled *The Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon*, which makes clear the distinguishing characteristics of the three texts used by Stevenson. These are the three British Museum manuscripts known as Cotton Claudius C ix, Cotton Claudius B vi, and Cotton Vitellius A xiii, and Sir Frank Stenton's monograph makes it clear that that is the order of their reliability for historical purposes. It also establishes that Claudius C ix, which survives in a copy of the late twelfth century, was composed, probably about 1150, by a monk who was an inhabitant of the Abbey in 1117. Claudius B vi and Vitellius A xiii have survived in handwriting of the thirteenth century, and it is probable that they were composed, as well as copied, after 1200. These facts were ignored in a discussion of the name Abingdon by O. G. S. Crawford in *Antiquity*,<sup>2</sup> and the view advanced there, which is repeated in E. Ekwall's *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*,<sup>3</sup> is consequently open to question.

The author of Claudius C ix opens his Chronicle with one sentence about the name Abingdon. He says ' Mons abbendone ad septemtrionalem plagam tamese fluuii ubi pretermeat pontem oxenefordis urbis situs est, a quo monasterio non longe posito idem nomen inditum '. These words, written c. 1150 by a man who was an inmate of the monastery before 1117, are probably the

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my husband for assistance in the preparation of this article, especially with regard to questions of topography.

<sup>2</sup> iv, 487-9.

<sup>3</sup> 3rd ed., 1947.

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most authoritative information we have about the hill called Abingdon. Unfortunately, they are not as lucid a geographical statement as could have been wished. If they can be interpreted as describing an area north of the Thames at Abingdon and also opposite the town of Oxford, *Æbbandūn* would then be the name of an upland area of some extent, comprising the high ground between Abingdon and North Hinksey. In this it would resemble *Æscesdūn*, the Old English name applied to the whole line of the Berkshire Downs. Abingdon is situated to the south of this ground, and could well be understood to derive its name from it. The second sentence of Claudius C ix introduces Hean and his sister Cille, for whose existence as historical characters there is good evidence. They lived in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, and Hean, the probable founder of the Abbey, was Abbot of Abingdon by the year 709.

One of the charters copied by the Abingdon chroniclers is a grant in the name of King Eadred, to which are attached the bounds of an estate to the north of the monastery. It is difficult to know what date should be assigned to these bounds. The charter<sup>4</sup> is stated by Sir Frank Stenton to be forged, which means that the Latin text was probably composed in the early twelfth century. The bounds which follow it, however, have a heading which claims that they are those of twenty hides at Abingdon given to the Abbey by King Cædwalla (685-9). It is not, perhaps, likely that the chroniclers had a genuine charter of Cædwalla (which would not, in any case, have included a boundary clause), but these bounds must, on linguistic grounds, be dated before the Conquest, and probably before A.D. 1000. They are important for the present discussion because they include the directions *to bromcumbes heafod. p' on gerihtum to abbendune . to pere port strete. p' andlang stret on hiwege . bromcumb* has given name to Brumcombe Copse in Sunningwell, and the *hiweg* ('hay way') can be identified with the help of other charter boundaries (for Abingdon, Bayworth and Hinksey) as the road from Boar's Hill to the Thames east of South Hinksey. This means that between the hollow in which Bayworth is situated (which seems to be the *cumb* of Brumcombe) and the point where the parish boundary between Sunningwell and Kennington meets the main road, the bounds mention *abbendun* and a *port stret*. The *port stret* cannot be identified, unless we are justified in assuming that the modern road from Abingdon through Bagley Wood ran to the west of its present line. This would enable it to avoid the two deep, marshy hollows which it now crosses in Bagley Wood ; but such a road would not normally be described as a 'street' in charter bounds. Since, however, we have two fixed points from which to work, *abbendun* can be placed with some degree of probability on or near the eastern tip of Boar's Hill. It

<sup>4</sup> Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, no. 906.

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is not easy to account for the occurrence of the name as a boundary mark, but we are hardly justified in adopting G. B. Grundy's desperate remedy of rearranging the text to read *to pere port strete to abbendune*, so that the *strete* could be understood as being the road to Abingdon.<sup>5</sup> The answer to the problem may be that the name was applied to the top of the hill as well as being used of a wider area. If the author of Claudius C ix had intended his first sentence to refer to the small piece of ground in the charter boundaries, however, it is difficult to believe that he would not have given a more precise definition of its whereabouts.

The author of Claudius B vi, who must have been familiar with these bounds, relates a story about the original foundation of the monastery being made at this spot, and he describes the site with some enthusiasm. 'Est autem locus ille in planitie montis, visu desiderabilis, paulisper ultra villam quæ nunc vocatur Sunnigewelle, inter duos rivulos amænissimos, qui, locum ipsum quasi quendam sinum inter se concludentes, gratum cernentibus præbent spectaculum et opportunum habitantibus subsidium.'<sup>6</sup> The two streams in question rise near the parish boundary and flow east to unite in Bagley Wood. The chronicler states that the foundation here was the work of an Irish monk named Abbenus, and that it was named *Abbendon* either after Abbenus, or from the place. He claims that this foundation took place before the arrival of the English in Britain, and he clearly believed that the monastery had been moved from the site near Sunningwell to its later site near the Thames in the time of Cædwalla.

Claudius C ix and Claudius B vi both include a number of spurious charters, which Sir Frank Stenton considers to have been forged in the early twelfth century, shortly before the composition of Claudius C ix. It is noteworthy that while the authors of these charters betray no knowledge of the story related in Claudius B vi about the monastery having been originally founded near Sunningwell, there may be a trace in one of them of a belief that *Abbendun* was all the high land north of Abingdon. A spurious charter of King Æthelbald<sup>7</sup> refers to the monastery in its position by the Thames as 'situm e latere montis Æbandune', which seems appropriate to the position of the place in relation to the higher ground to the north. Assuming that the name was used in this sense until the twelfth century, it would not be impossible for this to be forgotten between c. 1150 and c. 1225.

The story related in Claudius B vi was treated as a statement of historical fact by O. G. S. Crawford, who advanced the theory in *Antiquity*,<sup>8</sup> that *abbendun*

<sup>5</sup> *Berks, Bucks & Oxon Archaeological Journal*, xxvii (1922), 98-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, i, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Birch, no. 155.

<sup>8</sup> iv, 487-9.

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in the bounds of Eadred's charter referred to the original site of the monastery, and that the name moved downhill with the monks, thus accounting for the suffix *-dūn* as applied to flat land by the Thames. This view is repeated in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*. It is clear, however, that caution must be exercised with regard to a story known to the author of Claudius B vi, but not mentioned in the earlier chronicle, nor in charters forged in the early twelfth century. Sir Frank Stenton gave no credence to the story of the migration, but did not attempt to account for the occurrence of *abbendūn* as a point in the charter bounds, and thought that *dūn* in this name referred simply to the flat open land by the river. It is hoped that the interpretation advanced here, that *Æbbandūn* was originally used, like *Æscesdūn*, of a considerable stretch of high ground, at the foot of which Abingdon is situated, accounts satisfactorily for the element *dūn*. The boundary mark remains something of a problem, but the fact that Claudius B vi gives a coherent explanation of it does not necessarily make that narrative more authentic, since it is possible that the story of the migration arose mainly from the charter boundaries.

One aspect of the story related in Claudius B vi is very difficult to explain. The author describes the site by the Thames as 'villa Seuekesham, postea Abbendoniam appellata'.<sup>9</sup> Obviously he needed to give the town an earlier name to suit his story that the original Abingdon was near Sunningwell. It is difficult, however, to account for his choice. In the paragraph describing the town the name is spelt *Seouechesham*, and this form suggests a connection with *Seafecanworþ*, later known as Seacourt, a lost hamlet in Wytham: but the point of any such connection is entirely obscure. The name is not mentioned in any independent source, and although it defies explanation, it is hardly safe, on the authority of this text, to accept it as a genuine earlier name of the town of Abingdon. On the first folio of Claudius C ix the author introduces into his text some phrases from a charter which purports to be that of King Cædwalla, and above the statement 'ego ceadwalla rex westsaxonum terram iuxta abbendone . . . reddidi' a contemporary<sup>10</sup> hand has written 'est montem illam', glossing *abbendone*. This suggests that in the twelfth century the monks believed the abbey to have been the first habitation on its site, and felt that Cædwalla's charter could not be referring to the town. In this they may well have been correct, since Abingdon is, in the words of J. H. Round, 'the typical town that rises at the abbey gate'. According to Claudius B vi, however, *Seouechesham* was a flourishing city before the English came to Britain, and many holy objects were left by early Christians to be later dug up by the

<sup>9</sup> *Chronicon*, i, 6.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Mr. K. W. Humphreys, Librarian, Birmingham University Library, for advice on the dating of this note.

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monks, including the iron cross with which the dedication of St. Helen's church is connected.<sup>11</sup>

The version of these events given in Vitellius A xiii, the third of the manuscripts of the Abingdon Chronicle, would not need discussion if it had not been called in evidence by Dr. Crawford. This text contains a paragraph headed 'Ubi primo fundata est Abbatia', which introduces the story of the Irishman Abbenus with some embellishments, such as the miraculous appearance of a spring to quench his thirst.<sup>12</sup> The paragraph concludes with the statement that *Abendun* 'est mons qui juxta Baiwrthe situs est juxta Pinnesgrave'. The author is clearly referring to the *abbendun* of the charter bounds, which is between Bayworth and *Pinsgrove*, which latter place can be located with the help of later references south of Chilswell. A later passage of the work tells how Hean decided in the reign of Cissa to build a new monastery, and chose the site which had been left by Aben.<sup>13</sup> He tried to build a monastery there, but failed because each day's building had collapsed by the next day. After five years of this, he was told by a hermit who lived in Cumnor Woods that the monastery should be built at *Sevekesham*. Later the author describes the building constructed by Hean,<sup>14</sup> and here Dr. Crawford has misunderstood his source. He takes the buildings described to have been near Sunningwell, and suggests that the site marked on Ordnance Survey maps as 'site of Monastery', near Chandlings Farm east of Bayworth, should be associated with them. But it is clear that the chronicler is describing, not the monastery which Hean failed to build near Sunningwell, but the one which he did build 'ubi nunc est cellarium monachorum', not (as Dr. Crawford translates) 'where now is a monastic cell', but 'where now is the cellary of the monks', that is, on part of the site occupied by the thirteenth century monastery of Abingdon.<sup>15</sup> Here, and in his account of the number of monks in Hean's monastery,<sup>16</sup> the author may be supplying authentic and valuable information.

As regards the actual foundation of the Abbey, the author of Vitellius A xiii adds nothing of historical value to our knowledge, and the narrative of Claudius B vi, while the motives for some of the inventions contained in it cannot now be recovered, is not one to inspire confidence in the cautious reader. It seems probable that its author was equipped with little more than the

<sup>11</sup> *Chronicon*, i, 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, ii, 268.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, ii, 269-71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, ii, 272.

<sup>15</sup> For the architectural importance of the buildings described by this chronicler, see A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture* (1930), i, 36.

<sup>16</sup> *Chronicon*, ii, 272.



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material at the disposal of the twentieth century student, that is, the charter bounds which mention *abbendun* and the enigmatical first sentence of Claudius C ix; and that, like twentieth century writers, he was troubled by the fact that Abingdon is not situated on a hill.

The Abingdon bounds which are headed '*Mete xx hidarum abbendonie quas Ceadwalla rex westsaxonum deo et sancte Marie primitus dedit*'.

The text given here is that in Claudius C ix, which has all the bounds copied together at the end of the manuscript, dissociated from the Latin texts of the charters, which are copied into the narrative of the Chronicle. In Claudius B vi, these same bounds are copied as part of a spurious charter of King Eadred, although they have the same heading as in the earlier Chronicle, claiming that they are the bounds of the twenty hides at Abingdon given by King Cædwalla.<sup>17</sup>

Both manuscripts of the Chronicle include another set of bounds, stated to be those of twenty hides at Abingdon given by King Eadwig in 956.<sup>18</sup> These do not mention *abbendum*, but have a number of other boundary marks in common with the 'Cædwalla' set. They also have one stretch of boundary in common with Bayworth, as defined in a charter of 956,<sup>19</sup> and a number of boundary marks in common with Wootton, as given in a charter of 985,<sup>20</sup> and with Kennington in a charter of 956.<sup>21</sup> The probability is that both the Abingdon sets describe substantially the same area, and it is possible that the closer correspondence between the 'Eadwig' set and other tenth century bounds shows the 'Cædwalla' set to be somewhat earlier in date.

As regards the area delineated by the two sets of Abingdon bounds, I am not satisfied that this can be ascertained with absolute certainty, as they clearly do not correspond entirely with the modern parish boundaries. Grundy's suggestions are mostly reasonable, but his grounds for thinking that Chandlings Farm is included by one set and excluded by the other do not seem altogether adequate, and he is perhaps too definite about the position of a number of landmarks.<sup>22</sup> It has seemed best to mark on the accompanying map those charter names which can be placed with a fair degree of certainty, so that the reader can form his own opinion of the line taken by the bounds.

<sup>17</sup> Birch, no. 906.

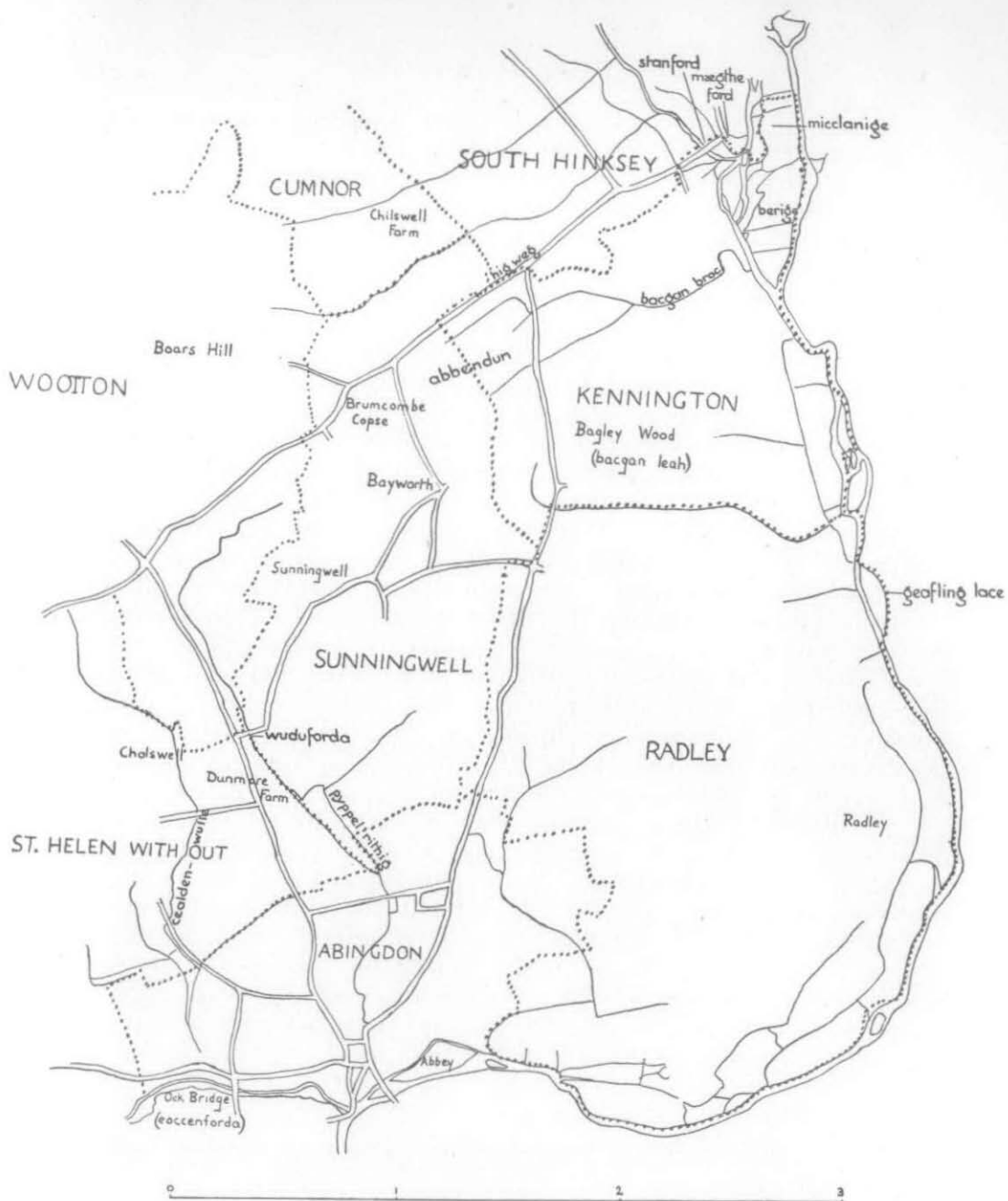
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 924.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 932. The bounds of 'Bayworth' describe the modern parishes of Sunningwell and Wootton, and give separate surveys of two pieces of meadow land by the Thames, one in Kennington, near *berige*, and the other in Radley, near Eney. The Abingdon bounds appear to exclude the first, and possibly the second, of these meads.

<sup>20</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, no. 1283.

<sup>21</sup> Birch, no. 971.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 96-102, 137-141.



Scale in miles

FIG. 17

Map of the area between Abingdon and South Hinksey, showing the conjectural position of some landmarks in charter boundaries.

Based on O.S. maps with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

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### TEXT

Ærest on eoccenforda. up andlang eoccenes to abbedes dic. þæt to cealden-wulle. þæt to mearcforda andlang broces oð þene grenen weig. andlang weges to broce. þæt to wuduforda. þæt adune be broce oð pyppel riðiges ut scyte. þæt þurhð ðene mor a be riðige. to guman grafe. þæt to pyppel bricge. þæt on ðene sic æt þere fulan æc. þæt to hæglea on ðæne bradan mere. þæt a be wyrt walan to bromcumbes heafod. þæt on gerihtum to abbendune. to þere port strete. þæt andlang stret on hiwege. þæt to ecgunes wyrðe. þenne on bacganleah. þæt on scæceling æcer. þæt ut on stanford. þæt to mægþeforda. andlang lace. ut on temese. þæt on forð mid streame wið ufan micclanige on cearewyllan. eft wið neoðan berige on temese. þæt þer up be streame. þæt on bacgan broc. þæt on heafoces oran. þæt on holan dene. þæt on tidewaldes wille. andlang broces ut on temese. þæt forð mid streame oð geafling lace. andlang lace eft ut on temese. þæt up be streame on occenes gerstun dic. þæt a be dic on eoccen. þæt þer up eft on eoccenforda. Æðeleahing wudu. colmanora. and geatescumb. hyren into ðys twentigum hydum. þa ic sylf studum gerad. studum gereow. and rumoðlice gescarode me sylfum.

### TRANSLATION

First to Ock ford<sup>23</sup>: up along the Ock to abbot's ditch: then to cold stream<sup>24</sup>: then to boundary ford along the brook to the green way: along the way to a brook: then to wood ford<sup>25</sup>: then down by the brook till pebble-stream's outfall: then through the marsh always by the stream: to man's grove: then to pebble-bridge: then to the small stream at the diseased oak: then to enclosure clearing to the broad pool: then always by *wyrtwala*<sup>26</sup> to the head of broom valley<sup>27</sup>: then straight to *Æbba's* hill: to the town street<sup>28</sup>: then along the street to hay way<sup>29</sup>: then to *Ecghūn's* enclosure: then to *Bacga's* wood (or clearing)<sup>30</sup>: then to *scæceling* acre: then out to stone ford: then to mayweed ford: along the stream: out to the Thames: then forward with the river above big island to the Cherwell: again beneath barley-island<sup>31</sup> to the Thames: then up by the river: then to *Bacga's* brook: then to hawk's slope: then to hollow valley: then to *Tidweald's* spring (or stream)<sup>32</sup>:

<sup>23</sup> This is the ford from which Ock Hundred (earlier *Ocford* Hundred) was named: Ock Bridge, on the same site, was called *pons ychelford* temp. Hen. I.

<sup>24</sup> This is the stream from which Cholswell, north of Abingdon, is named.

<sup>25</sup> This ford is also mentioned in charter bounds of Bayworth and Wootton: see map for its position.

<sup>26</sup> This word, which means 'root', is common in charter boundaries: it may denote the edge of a wood or of a slope.

<sup>27</sup> See p. 55 *supra*.

<sup>28</sup> See pp. 55-6, *supra*.

<sup>29</sup> See p. 55, *supra*.

<sup>30</sup> *Bacgan leah* is the source of modern *Bagley*. *leah* can mean 'wood' or 'clearing' in place-names, and it is not certain whether this was originally the name of the whole wood, or whether the wood took its name from a clearing on its northern border.

<sup>31</sup> The ownership of this island was disputed in the mid-tenth century, and the monks asserted their right to it by a curious and interesting ceremony described in the *Chronicon*, i, 88-9.

<sup>32</sup> Grundy (*op. cit.*, p. 101) identifies this with 'the well beside the road immediately south of the hamlet of Little London', and he may be correct. It is possible, however, that it was once the name of the brook which forms the boundary between Kennington and Radley, called *Wulfrices broc* in the other Abingdon bounds, and in those of Kennington.



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along the brook out to the Thames : then forward with the river to *geafling* stream : along the stream again out to the Thames : then up by the river to the ditch of the grass enclosure by the Ock : then always by the ditch to the Ock : then up again to Ock ford. *Æthelhēah's* wood, coalman-slope and Yatscombe<sup>33</sup> may belong to this twenty hides : which I myself traversed, sometimes<sup>34</sup> riding, sometimes rowing, and liberally bestowed myself.

<sup>33</sup> Yatscombe survives on the 6-inch map in Sunningwell. *Colmanora* is shown by its occurrence in the bounds of Wootton to be the slope east of Boar's Hill. *Ætheleahing wudu* is not mentioned again, and its position cannot be ascertained.

<sup>34</sup> This translation involves reading *stundum* for *studum*.